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ASHLEY C. FORD

A writer well acquainted with society's construction of body image, Ford met with I Weigh founder Jameela Jamil for this issue's Playboy Interview. "Jameela has certainly amplified the conversation about who gets to influence what we view as 'beautiful' or 'normal' bodies and how they directly benefit from the insecurities they encourage," says the Brooklyn-based writer. Named one of Forbes magazine's 30 Under 30 in Media in 2017, she's currently working on a memoir, Somebody's Daughter.

NADINE STROSSEN

In Words Matter, the New York Law School professor emerita and former ACLU president emphasizes the correlation between speech and progress. Strossen, who penned the 2018 book Hate: Why We Should Resist It With Free Speech, Not Censorship, argues, "The only effective way to encourage political correctness is through more speech. Civil discourse requires respectfully listening to ideas, as well as respectfully responding."

SASHA SAMSONOVA

The Ukrainian photographer, known for her portrait work, has lent Playboy her talents several times in the past year, shooting porn star turned whistle-blower Stormy Daniels, as well as makeup mogul Kylie Jenner and her then beau, Travis Scott. For The Empath, Samsonova turned her lens on Alicia Loraina Olivas, our tenacious June Playmate. "Alicia's confidence and fearlessness just poured out of her," says Samsonova. "She stood in ice-cold water and was like, 'I feel great!' She radiated so much energy — nothing inspires me more."

ALICIA GARZA

"Democracy is not a spectator sport. I hope the Symposium motivates readers to get involved," says the #BlackLivesMatter co-founder and guest editor of the latest Playboy Symposium. The seasoned community organizer recently founded Black Futures Lab and co-founded Supermajority to empower black communities and women in politics respectively. She also serves as the strategy and partnerships director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance and is a frequent contributor to Marie Claire.

GEORGE MCCALMAN

The vignettes bringing to life the voices in The Playboy Symposium are creations of this San Francisco–based artist. "The five figures are all fighters," says McCalman. "They believe humanity can be better than it is. I tried to capture that essence in my illustrations." His work can also be found in the San Francisco Chronicle columns Observed and The Usual, and in his debut collection,Illustrated Black History, out in August.

MATT LASLO

What makes Cory Gardner of Colorado a unique figure in national politics? playboy called on veteran Washington reporter Laslo to find out. In Senator Gardner, Radical Centrist, he discovers that despite sharing a ballot with Republicans, Gardner often holds positions that diverge from his party's. Of note: his support for cannabis legalization. "I was most surprised to learn Gardner — a champion of his state's legal cannabis industry — has never even tried weed," reports Laslo.

LONNIE MILLSAP

The Reuben Award–nominated cartoonist and New Yorker contributor has a significant professional relationship with our Speech Issue's theme. "As a cartoonist, freedom of speech is important because it gives you the ability to expand on any idea that comes to mind without having to answer to anybody," he says. Millsap's cartoons can be found in his annual art books, the latest of which is My Nib Is Cold!, and on page 61.

KILEY REID

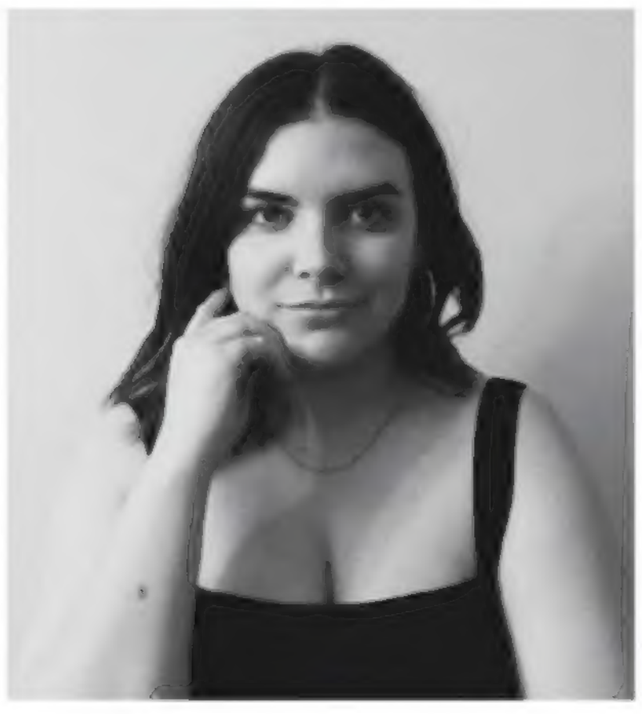
"I was thrilled to make playboy a home for this short story, since it's one I've spent longer on than any other short piece," says the Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate and Truman Capote Fellow of her inaugural Playboy fiction piece, Your First Pet and the Street You Grew Up On. In 2019 the Philadelphiabased writer released her debut novel, Such a Fun Age, landing herself a spot on the New York Times best-sellers list.

TINA HORN

For SFSX: The Dirty Mind Guide 2 Talking Dirty, Horn collaborated with illustrator Alejandra Gutiérrez to bring her comic series to life for playboy. "Alejandra helped me dial down the serious nature of my sci-fi comics and accentuate the playful fizziness, sight gags and absurd horniness instead." In addition to working in comics, Horn is a nonfiction writer, Rolling Stone reporter, podcast producer and host (Why Are People Into That?!) and sex-work educator.

KRISTI BECK

Our senior manager of partner strategy is no stranger to Playboy magazine: Beck has been helping select Playmates for more than a year. "I'm passionate about female self-image and have worked to increase inclusivity in the Playboy brand. It's exciting to help a meaningful franchise evolve." For this issue, Beck expanded her role, recruiting I Weigh's Jameela Jamil, a fellow champion of inclusivity, to serve as guest editor.



RICHIE TALBOY

"I was hoping to rewrite history while capturing the iconic hypermasculinity of men's fragrance campaigns from the 1980s and 1990s," says the photographer of his shoot for The Future Is Dorian Electra. "Dorian was perfect for that, because they have a natural campiness that's ideal for creating imagery." Talboy portrays all his subjects—his clients include the high-fashion brand Prada as well as such high-profile celebrities as Kim Kardashian — with a distinct air of eccentricity.

OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

New York magazine and Artforum are just two of the publications Yerebakan contributes to in addition to playboy. For this issue, the writer traveled to Chicago to meet Nick Cave, subject of our artist feature Body & Soul. "Meeting Nick at Facility, where he lives and works, was a unique experience," says Yerebakan. "It gave me the opportunity to witness his everyday life. It's those intimate moments that illustrate Cave's prolific nature as a thinker, maker and human."

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Silenced *by* Hollywood

BY **AMANDA FORTINI**

Despite public perception that women's voices are now being heard in the film and TV industries, the price of speaking out can still be steep

In 2012, actor, writer and producer Naomi McDougall Jones set out to make her first feature film, *Imagine I'm Beautiful*, a psychological drama about the friendship between "two interesting, complex female characters," in her words. She and her female co-producer began having conversations with investors and producers — primarily though not entirely male — who would often make comments like "Well, girls, you know you're going to have to get a male producer onboard at some point just so people will trust you with their money."

"Literally, it was this never-ending refrain of 'Yeah, but nobody wants to see movies about women,' " recalls McDougall Jones, whose book, ***The Wrong Kind of Women: Inside Our Revolution to Dismantle the Gods of Hollywood***, was published in February. " 'You really have to think about making something else.' Or 'Is there a lesbian angle you could explore?' or 'Could you have more blood?' I was like, Oh, my God, what the fuck is happening?"

Around that time, Stacy Smith, a professor and researcher at the University of Southern California who had been tracking gender and diversity in top-grossing films since 2007, noted in a *Hollywood Reporter* article that of the top 100 films of 2013, two of them — two! — were directed by women and that women claimed less than a third of all speaking parts.

The numbers were shocking, but they didn't surprise me. Living in an overwhelmingly male neighborhood in Malibu (one populated by single men, divorced men, consummate bachelors and retirees — many of them Hollywood veterans), I regularly heard men talk in ways I hadn't anywhere else: about "chicks" they'd fucked, about "unfortunate" episodes with strippers, about preferences for disturbingly young women.

I'd begun to form a picture of Hollywood as one of the most retrograde places on earth — "the last extant stable society," as Joan Didion wrote, referring to its status-quo conservatism — one where women are treated as fungible, dispensable beauties, where female directors aren't given work and actresses are rarely given lines. I often wondered what equality might look like. As I set out to write this article, five and a half years after my time in Malibu and more than two after the second coming of MeToo, I still didn't have an answer.

• • •

In October 2017, three months after Smith released her 2016 findings — "The needle is not moving onscreen for females in film," she wrote — *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* both published articles in which numerous women recounted being harassed, abused and assaulted by Harvey Weinstein, the godfather of contemporary independent film. Among the first women to speak out were four well-known actresses — Rosanna Arquette, Ashley Judd, Asia Argento and Mira Sorvino — in addition to many lesser-known others. (Models and assistants also made statements.) Their stories were remarkably similar in their horrifying contours: tales of being summoned to hotel rooms for meetings where Weinstein would undress, don a bathrobe, demand massages, take showers in front of the women, touch them inappropriately, offer work for sex, assault and sometimes rape them.

"I've always been an outspoken woman. The MeToo stuff isn't new for me," says Arquette, referring to the movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006 and reignited by Alyssa Milano on Twitter, when we speak on the phone one afternoon. "But to come out and tell the truth, about a man who sexually assaulted and abused and threatened and bullied many, many women — probably the most powerful man in Hollywood, as we're seeing from the lengths he went to disrupt, destroy and discredit everyone — has been a lot."

ILLUSTRATION BY **KELLETTE ELLIOTT**

Why hadn't these women spoken out earlier? In the *New York Times* article, reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey wrote about the "code of silence" enforced by Weinstein at his company. At least eight women had received settlements, and most who accepted payment signed nondisclosure agreements that muzzled them; some had finally decided to break those provisos. Others were afraid of all the usual things women fear: retribution and ruined careers, reputations and lives. But by late in the second decade of the 21st century Bill Cosby and Roger Ailes had fallen, and the world was beginning to change. "Women have been talking about Harvey amongst ourselves for a long time," Ashley Judd told the *Times*, "and it's simply beyond time to have the conversation publicly."

The Weinstein stories poured forth. Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie reported their own run-ins with him, their fame acting as a kind of ballast for the other accounts — more than 100 to date. Actress Annabella Sciorra excavated a cache of frightening memories, including being raped by Weinstein in her own apartment. As I write this, she's testifying against him at his criminal trial in Manhattan.

Women in entertainment began to open up not only about sexual misconduct — there were so many galling stories, from Les Moonves's intimidation tactics to Matt Lauer's creepy desk button to R. Kelly's reported abuse of underage girls, that it was difficult to keep track — but also about formerly taboo subjects such as pay equity, lack of representation and feeling unsafe on set.

"Historically, if you won an acting award, you were allowed to get up and make your speech for whatever your cause was, and hopefully it was something taking place many thousands of miles away from Hollywood," Richard Rushfield, who writes the industry newsletter *The Ankler*, tells me. "But as an actor you're not allowed to complain about the movie business and how it's done."

Yet actors were talking. *The Grey's Anatomy* star Ellen Pompeo spoke about that traditionally forbidden subject, her paycheck — she was astonishingly transparent about the negotiations that led to her $20 million annual salary — and expressed her frustration with ABC for refusing to pay her more than Patrick Dempsey, her former co-star. Olivia Munn successfully lobbied for the deletion of a scene from the film *The Predator* in which she appeared alongside convicted sex offender Steven Wilder Striegel.

But Munn's story exemplifies the blowback a woman in Hollywood experiences if she's too candid or too vocal. The actress told *Vanity Fair* that her male co-stars brushed her off and canceled interviews with her; they also gave the film's director, Shane Black, a tone-deaf standing ovation at the film's premiere. "I kind of feel like I'm the one going to jail," Munn said.

I thought of this when I read that Gabrielle Union's America's Got Talent contract wasn't renewed late last year after she'd reported a toxic and racially insensitive work environment at NBCUniversal. (According to one report, she was repeatedly told her hair was "too black.") "Are you going to assimilate and allow all of this to go on? Or are you going to say something and immediately be othered?" Union said on an empowerment-and-diversity panel shortly after she was fired.

Seeing this, I began to ask: Was Hollywood really changing? If so, for whom? Women might be speaking up more, about injustices personal and professional, but at what cost? Had we witnessed a seismic, lasting shift or a fissure that was already sealing itself up?

"I think it depends on who you are in Hollywood, in terms of your ability to speak out," Melissa Silverstein, founder and publisher of the site Women and Hollywood, tells me. "Yes, for some people it has changed, but I still think there's a price you pay when you speak out and you're a woman, and particularly when you're a woman of color."

• • •

In October 2015, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission began an investigation into Hollywood's discriminatory hiring practices — a secret as open in the industry as Weinstein's predatory behavior — after the ACLU notified the agency of ongoing discrimination against female directors. (Less than two years later, the EEOC entered into settlement talks with the major studios; if charges can't be resolved, a lawsuit will likely be filed.)

The following month, *The New York Times Magazine* published Maureen Dowd's landmark article "The Women of Hollywood Speak Out," for which the writer interviewed more than 100 women and men in film. Citing Smith's research, she noted the disproportionately small number of women who had directed the top-grossing films of the previous two years — only 1.9 percent of the total. "It's kind of like the Church," said Anjelica Huston in the piece. "They don't want us to be priests. They want us to be obedient nuns."

Ellen Barkin, whose credits range from *Sea of Love* to *Ocean's Thirteen*, calls herself an "opinionated shit-stirrer." "Women pay dearly" for speaking out, she tells me. "Men don't experience any of this."

Historically, of course, outspoken women in entertainment have been censored, silenced and maligned. In the early 20th century, Mae West, whose racy performances consistently pushed boundaries, was banned from radio, saw her shows shut down and once spent 10 days in jail on obscenity charges. Jane Fonda was branded the treacherous "Hanoi Jane" for her anti-war activism (and for the ill-considered photo she posed for on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun while on a 1972 trip to Hanoi), even though by that time much of America was against the Vietnam war. To be sure, women are labeled difficult or crazy for much less: being too abrasive, too louche, even too old. As Tina Fey once wrote, "The definition of 'crazy' in show business is a woman who keeps talking even after no one wants to fuck her anymore."

Jena Friedman, comedian and former writer for *The Late Show With David Letterman*, tells me, "Any woman getting on stage, you're inherently political because you're occupying a space that you historically haven't been able to or been encouraged to occupy."

Many never made it that far. "The history of film is littered with the careers of women who have spoken out," says McDougall Jones. "The fact is, we don't know who they all are because they were

This isn't a takedown of men. It's about holding bad people accountable."

squashed." She tells me that when she began talking about the difficulties she had getting her two feature films made, she was "informed, in no uncertain terms, that if I did not shut up, I would destroy my career."

Arquette knows this all too well: "I was told by close girlfriends of mine, 'You should be quiet.' " She tells me she has been given the cold shoulder by certain figures in the industry, and she recalls the silence of friends in the days before the Weinstein trial. "I didn't hear from anyone; I still haven't. I do have the sisters, the sistersurvivors — the other women. But I've never felt so alone in my life."

If you watched the Golden Globes, held the night before Weinstein's trial began in early January, you likely noticed that no one mentioned the famous predator or his trial — other than the much-maligned Ricky Gervais. ("Our next presenter starred in Netflix's *Bird Box*," he said of Sandra Bullock, "a movie where people survive by acting like they don't see a thing — sort of like working for Harvey Weinstein.") Similarly, at the 2018 Golden Globes, which were held a mere three months after the allegations broke, actresses wore all black on the red carpet in a rather tepid act of protest. None of the silence-breakers were present, with the exception of Ashley Judd.

Nearly everyone I interviewed mentioned the initially anemic response of the Hollywood establishment, particularly that of Time's Up, the anti-harassment initiative that boasts many highprofile founders (among them Reese Witherspoon, Eva Longoria and Natalie Portman) and a great deal of money ($24 million) but few concrete achievements anyone could point to.

"In Hollywood, everyone wants to wear the pins and walk down the red carpet and say how concerned they are," says Rushfield, referring to the Time's Up lapel pins attendees wore to the 2018 Golden Globes. "But getting into details is not what actors do." Arquette, however, emphasizes that the group has been more vocal in support of survivors since lawyer and former Michelle Obama aide Tina Tchen took the helm in November. Recently the organization issued a statement critical of NBCUniversal for dismissing Union and "protecting the careers of powerful men at the expense of women who speak out." Tchen also told me they have funded PR and legal support for more than 200 harassment and discrimination cases.

Still, Rushfield suggests that the movement is backsliding: "MeToo sort of became a net. It's like the narrative became, 'Well, that solves that. That's dealt with now.' So people who have continued are raining on the parade. It's like, 'Hey, remember when we solved sexual harassment?' "

"A lot of men are waiting for this 'episode' to go away," Arquette says. "They're doing everything they can to shut it down and shut it up, and there are many predators still in power in Hollywood."

She goes momentarily quiet. I can hear traffic noises in the distance. "There are so many good men, and we want them to be our allies," she continues. "This isn't a takedown of men. It's about holding bad people accountable."

Everyone I spoke with also emphasized that what keeps women — and trans and nonbinary people — silent isn't only men but a deeply entrenched system. Women also enforce the patriarchy, as anyone who has read bell hooks knows.

"We're working in a system set up by a bunch of white guys, 55 and over, who have put in place a few white women, 55 and over," says Barkin. "I believe that if you're an outspoken woman in Hollywood, if you're a woman who overtly protects herself in Hollywood, and if you're lucky enough to work as an artist, the price you will pay" — she raises her famously gravelly voice — "will be your art. Your very reason for being is the price you will pay, one way or another. They don't have to not employ you — they can employ you forever — but you won't get the opportunities to be who you are, to fill up your own well. And opportunity is everything."

• • •

In 2020 opportunity is everything, because the scarcity of jobs makes people reluctant to speak out for fear they won't work. In 2018 only five of the 112 directors who worked on the 100 topgrossing films were women, and female actors still played only 33.1 percent of characters with lines. Opportunity is everything, because the people who tell our stories, and the actors who embody them, shape our culture, our reality. If all the storytellers are men, society will continue to believe that only men are entitled to speak; we'll continue to live in a world that believes only men's subjectivity matters. The lack of jobs and the collective consciousness are not unconnected.

"Something like 95 percent of all the images you've ever seen in films were directed by men, and overwhelmingly white, straight, cis men," says McDougall Jones. "Eighty to 90 percent of all the leading characters you've ever seen in movies were white men, and 55 percent of the time you've seen a woman character on screen in a film, she was naked or scantily clad. Draw a line between that and the studies showing that the films and media content we watch generally affect everything from our career choices to our hobbies to our relationships to our sense of identity to literally our brain chemistry. If you hold those two facts beside each other, you have to think about the enormity of what that has done to us."

What's frustrating is that the solution remains remarkably straightforward, attainable even. "The problem in Hollywood is that you actually have to give people jobs for it to change," says Silverstein. "The people in power actually have to hire women. And that's really simple: Just hire them!"

As the old guard dies out, Barkin is hopeful. "The change is coming," she says. "It's just a waiting game now." ■

"Shadow-ban this."

CAFE CUBANO

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CAFE CUB

Tell us something surprising about you?
I am only 5'3, most models are 5'6 and up.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Excited is an understatement! It's been a dream of mine to be published in PlayBoy.

What inspires you?
Others inspire me, I like proving those who say I'm not capable of something wrong.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
I've always wanted to model. Just recently I started shooting and fell in love with it. I love being in front of the camera and being able to express myself through art.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
Naomi Campbell, she broke the standards. Which helped all aspiring models, regardless of size, color, and age, to be recognized as a model.

What are some of your hobbies?
I love to paint and take pictures. I also enjoy spending my time in nature, I love to take my dogs hiking and to the beach!

Name three things on your bucket list?
Three goals on my buck list are 1. Landing the cover of PlayBoy. 2. Starting my own swimwear line. 3. Walk in New York Fashion Weeks Show.

Turn-ons
Turn-ons consist of good personality, humor, sweet, caring, and loving.

Turn-offs
Some turn-offs consist of being rude, know it alls, and being disrespectful.

Describe to us your perfect date
A perfect date to me would consist of an outfit chosen for me with a note saying to be ready at a specific time. For the guy to plan the whole date from start to finish. No phones, just enjoying one another's company.

Which world capital would you most like to visit and why?
Addis Ababa, Africa has been a dream of mine to visit since I was 12 years old. It would be amazing to shoot in such a beautiful place.

What is your mantra?
My mantra is, "Everything happens for a reason." I'm a firm believer in this saying and am able to find peace within it.

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: JAMEELA JAMIL

A candid conversation with the activist, Good Place star and social-media firebrand on figuring out when to take up space and when to stand aside

Every once in a while, somewhere amid the shouting, social media can offer glimpses behind the Vaseline-smeared lenses of the entertainment industry. The stars and their feeds suggest a vast gulf between our regular lives and those whose accounts we follow, like and mimic. Actress, writer, DJ and activist Jameela Jamil is hyper aware of the dynamics at play and how they directly affect the lives of vulnerable people offline; indeed, she has taken it upon herself to protect those people. No one asked her to do this, and some don't believe she should. Jamil considers it a duty nonetheless. She views acting and hosting as her work — and work she's grateful for — but activism is her calling. She also thinks of it as just one of the many ways traumatized people try to tell the truth.

Jamil was born in London in 1986. Her parents were raised Muslim but didn't run a religious household. They were conservative, however, and their insistence that Jamil play the role of helper in the family, coupled with a condition that rendered her mostly deaf from birth to the age of 12, left the young girl consumed by her own silence. In her 20s she worked in British radio and TV, developed an eating disorder, made a lot of money, spent a lot of money, gave away a lot of money, endured public abuse while coping with the private abuse she'd suffered as a child, had a nervous breakdown amid battles with depression, anxiety and PTSD, and discovered a lump in her breast. The lump, and the cancer kite floating above it, ready to crash-land into the human life below, changed everything. At 28 she booked a one-way ticket to Los Angeles.

Soon Jamil learned the lump wasn't cancer, but that didn't mean she was going back to London. The move to Hollywood led to a meeting with agents, who sent her out to audition for a role in what was then referred to only as a new halfhour comedy from producer Michael Schur (*The Office, Parks & Recreation*). Despite having no acting experience to speak of, Jamil earned the part of Tahani Al-Jamil on what we now know as the NBC comedy series *The Good Place*, which signed off this year after four critically acclaimed seasons.

Over the series' first three seasons, between talk-show appearances and panel discussions with the cast, Jamil quickly became a media darling. In interviews she was as funny as she was direct in her support of progressive politics and thought. On social media she called out influencers and other

"To stay on this earth—I'm going to do it, and I'm going to make it an adventure and figure out who the fuck I actually am."

"I would be so rich if I had put my principles aside and worked with the beauty and weight-loss-product companies."

"Tahani couldn't be further from who I am. She's very driven by what other people think of her, whereas I couldn't give a flying fuck."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN PFLUGER**

celebrities for posting personalized ads for weight-loss products, especially when those ads were highly visible to impressionable children; she even successfully pushed Instagram to block minors from seeing posts about dieting and cosmetic surgery. She responded to tabloid-journalism comments on celebrities' weight with the hashtag #iweigh, encouraging herself and her followers to measure their worth in experiences, beliefs and identities instead of body mass or lack thereof. She has addressed the United Nations and spoken out about anti-abortion legislation. She supports numerous charities for at-risk young people and advocates for individuals with disabilities and those suffering from mental-health issues.

She has also annoyed a lot of people. By her own admission, those people haven't always been wrong. For the past year or so there has been an interesting tension between those who believe Jameela Jamil is trying to help, those who believe Jameela Jamil is part of the problem and those who fall somewhere in between. Case in point: On February 4 (shortly before this issue went to press), HBO announced Jamil as one of the judges for its upcoming competitive voguing series, prompting Twitter backlash from members of the houseball community who questioned whether the star deserves a spot on a show about an LGBTQ subculture. The following day Jamil defended her role on the show while at the same time coming out publicly as queer in a tweet, though she soon admitted it had been "the most inappropriate and unfortunate time" to come out. As of press time she was still committed to the show; Jamil is not one to let the naysayers tell her what to do.

Shortly before *The Good Place* aired its series finale, playboy sent writer **Ashley C. Ford** to Los Angeles to chat with Jamil, who was also stepping in as a guest editor of the magazine. Ford reports: "Jameela insisted we eat before we talked and suggested Erewhon Market near the Grove shopping mall. When I arrived at the upscale food store, I found she was wearing the same cactus-print pajamas I'd seen her wear in countless Instagram posts. She would later wear the ensemble to a party thrown by Beyoncé.

"On the drive to her home, tucked away in the Hollywood Hills, I wondered if Jamil was just another rich, beautiful woman one would expect to 'get away' with sporting sleepwear at the grocery store — and an Alist megastar's party. As we discussed her work, her beliefs and her personae, it became clear that she is far too complicated to be defined by such a lazy assessment.

"Her voice, melodic and posh, serves the image of a popular TV actress. But she exhibits none of the obvious insecurities or overcompensations of Tahani. She's graceful until she isn't, and when she isn't, it's not a pratfall; it's flat on her face. Whether she was or wasn't what I expected didn't matter to her at all. Despite being friendly with each other online for months, and being in conversation together at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, this was our first opportunity to sit and talk one-on-one. The day before the interview she found herself battling Twitter commenters after posting that she didn't regret having an abortion. And of course, social-media standoffs are a natural place to start any conversation with Jamil."

PLAYBOY: Talk to me about this abortion tweet.

JAMIL: My Twitter feed is a hot mess of people telling me they love my fetus. I'm like, No, you don't. You don't know me, you fucking creep. People can't handle that I wasn't in an emergency. I wasn't a 12-year-old; I wasn't a rape victim or an incest victim. I was just 26 and mentally unwell. Condom broke, morning-after pill didn't work. Got failed twice in one day by contraception and then didn't want to be pregnant because I was mentally unwell — I have a chronic illness. I wasn't in the mood for 19 years of fear and responsibility — and 10 months of my body and my mind and my hormones changing, and all the pain and discomfort that comes with a pregnancy I wasn't ready for. And I wasn't in the right relationship. It was just all wrong, so I protected myself. And I'd do it again.

PLAYBOY: Why do you think that can be hard for people to hear?

JAMIL: Because they don't respect women's rights. Also, I think it has a lot to do with how you grew up. Mothers are seen predominantly in the role of nurturer, and there's nothing wrong with that. That's great. Being a housewife and a mother is an incredibly noble role in the world. But you then look at all women only as that. It's like if you watch a lot of porn, after a while you start to look at all women as something that's going to suck or fuck.

PLAYBOY: You're guest editing this issue of PLAYBOY. Do you read it for the articles?

JAMIL: I always assumed it was a joke when people said PLAYBOY's journalism was really amazing. It's only now that I look back and realize how many incredible interviews have appeared in the

magazine. There have also been some wonderful-looking women in PLAYBOY, and I really enjoy the female form. But once I grew up and started to understand patriarchy and objectification, and not wanting to contribute to that, I stopped involving myself with the publication. Then I went through a kind of heavy period of not wanting to see any kind of female sexuality or nudity. I turned fully the other way and started to become angry about female nudity, which I'm thankful I no longer stand by.

PLAYBOY: What made you angry about it?

JAMIL: I was abused when I was younger, but the thing that really impacted me around female sexuality was being raped when I was 22. That caused a sudden change in the way I felt around female sexuality and objectification, and I started to almost feel angry with the women who were empowering but objectifying themselves. I was mad at them because I felt they were contributing to the culture that made men look at me as nothing more than a sexual object. That was because I didn't understand the concept of patriarchy. I didn't understand the system, and I didn't understand that it's not our fault. There was some part of me that blamed myself, and I blamed women, and it just poured out of me, which was my response to trauma. I hadn't had any therapy; I didn't think I needed it. I felt mad at women, which is so ridiculous, because that's not the right target. It's a whole system of oppression.

PLAYBOY: Don't you think a lot of women have had that response?

JAMIL: Yes, but I didn't understand that until now. Having been someone who was quite slut-shamey when I was younger, a decade ago, I now understand that thought process. Some people come from a religious background. I grew up in quite a reserved family, with parents who had been raised Muslim, and even though they were no longer practicing, they still held a lot of the values. Sex was a taboo subject in my household. That contributes to our judgment around it, but there can also sometimes be a rage toward those we feel are complicit in the culture.

I do stand by one issue I have with the way women are objectified in our media, even when they objectify themselves. When Madonna did it, it felt like a fucking party, like everyone was fucking everyone. It didn't feel as though one person was performing for another but that we were all in on the show. Now there's more of a culture where the woman is in underwear and doing all the dancing, and the man is wearing outdoor winter layers and sitting on a chair. You can't even gauge the temperature in the room — who has the thyroid problem? That annoys me, because why should we do all the work? And I genuinely think that attitude permeates our culture.

PLAYBOY: How do you stop doing all the work?

JAMIL: In bed, sexually? I just stopped. One day, in my 20s, I decided to stop. There was a specific moment when I was kissing a boyfriend, and I just stopped him and said, "I don't like kissing like this. This isn't how I like to be kissed." I'd never said that before. In five years of kissing, I'd never told people — almost all of whom had kissed me badly — that I wasn't interested in their style of kissing. Having the freedom to say, "I would prefer to be kissed like this," felt like the beginning of my sexual autonomy.

I was this It girl, and everything was so charmed, but I was dying inside.

PLAYBOY: How did the guy you were kissing react to your honesty?

JAMIL: Absolutely stunned. Aghast. But that was followed by the kiss I'd asked for. Then we had great kisses for another year.

PLAYBOY: You had your first kiss at the age of 21. Did you feel ready for it?

JAMIL: It was very weird for me to willfully engage in something I'd always felt was something that was done to me. That was really hard, even at 21, and it wasn't the only reason I didn't get kissed; I also had a tremendously unsexy personality, which has never gone away. I've got big boobies, so that makes up for it. But no, I don't think I've ever been ready for it. The smartest thing I did was wait until it was someone I chose and trusted, and I knew he cared about me and already loved me before I kissed him. It was the most exceptional first kiss a human being could have. I swear to God, I fucking heard Nat King Cole play; fireworks went off — all the shit you see in the movies. I kissed a grown man who knew what he was doing, and he did everything at my pace. It was another six months before I lost my virginity. But I was with someone who was caring, who knew what happened to me when I was younger and just wanted to look after me.

PLAYBOY: Where did this reclamation of yours come from?

JAMIL: I had started to realize I was having sex like in the movies. I was having sex like porn. I was emulating. I wasn't in touch with myself and therefore wasn't really enjoying anything of a sexual nature. I was just acting like I was there to please the other person and make them feel good about what they were doing, which I think is a pretty common theme among women, especially since the takeoff of online porn. We think that as long as they've had a good time then we've had a good time. I'm not speaking for all women, but a lot of women I know go through that, especially when we're young. We think the goal is to entertain and be reviewed highly among the guy's friends.

After my nervous breakdown I felt I had the right to say anything because I'd gone through this sort of rebirth. For a lot of people, depression is just repressed rage and a repression of yourself. On the outside, it looked like I had a perfect life; I was this It girl and this party DJ, and everything was so charmed, but I was dying inside. I made a deal with myself that the only way I was willing to stay on this earth was if I told the complete truth. I'd been mentally ill and suicidal since I was a child. I tried twice in my life to kill myself: when I was younger, and again at 26. So I was like, This is the last thing you're going to try — just tell the complete truth all the time.

PLAYBOY: What does it feel like to have a breakdown?

JAMIL: I'm English, so I'm not a highly emotional person externally. But my breakdown came in the form of inaction. I didn't identify that I had depression, because I wasn't crying all the time; I wasn't lying down eating ice cream under a blanket. It was a complete lack of emotion. It

was a complete lack of care about myself, about other people, about anything. Beyond ambivalence, it was just a numbness. I found everything overwhelming. Brushing my teeth at night was overwhelming — so many cavities. I found booking a flight to just be too much. Everything felt like I was being torn into pieces—not even in a painful way but in a way that just continued to make me feel more and more separated from the world. It's like whatever George Clooney feels in the film Gravity when he lets go and just floats off. That's what my breakdown felt like, that I wasn't attached to anything or anyone.

That's what makes suicide such an appealing option in that moment, so I desperately beg for people considering it to hang on. Often those most suicidal moments happen because of a particularly bad day, or sometimes it's a particularly bad 10 minutes. I beg of you to stay and sleep on it and try to find help; try to do something you've never done before to see if you can reactivate yourself, and try telling the whole truth all the time. It explains why I'm now this maniac who has so much to lose but still risks it all. Because this is the deal I made with myself to put up with this shit, to stay on this earth. I'm going to do it, and I'm going to make it an adventure and figure out who the fuck I actually am.

It's only now, in my 30s, that I'm starting to work that out, and I'm lucky I'm with a man who wants to know more and more about who I actually am. It's the moments when I don't know he's looking at me that he finds most enjoyable, when he's investigating who I am as a person. Even when we fight, he's the first boyfriend I've ever had who encourages me to fight back. He never curtails my rage or my voice.

PLAYBOY: We're talking of course about your longtime boyfriend, singer-songwriter James Blake. How did the two of you meet?

JAMIL: We met because we were both radio DJs at the BBC, and we became fast friends. I was moving to Los Angeles, and he told me he was also moving there. That was a fucking lie. He was like, "No way. Me too." The lyrics of his song "I'll Come Too" are explicitly about us getting to know each other, almost like a diary entry. Because for a minute I was like, "Oh, I might actually go to New York," and he was like, "Oh yeah, I might also go to New York." He's just a hot, talented stalker.

PLAYBOY: How has James changed your perspective on sex?

JAMIL: I consider our sex life something sacred. What I will say is it's fantastic, and he makes me feel safe in every single way as a person. My whole life, I was missing someone who would just make me feel safe. If you're an abuse victim, the number one thing that can unlock your truest sexuality and humanity is just someone who makes you feel that way. That's the time when you can most engage with who you really are and what you really want. That's the thing he does every single day. I realize that whenever he's not in the house, there's a part of me that doesn't even recognize that I don't feel safe until he walks back in again, and it's like a light switches back on.

Before him, I'd always felt that being needed was a burden. Now I'm okay with him needing me, and I'm okay with needing him. I was a very lonely child. I was deaf until I was 12. I lived in silence for a lot of my life. I didn't have friends when I was younger, and I'm not super close with all of my family. I was very good at not needing anyone and being self-sufficient. I was almost smug about that — I thought I was Neo in *The Matrix*. I don't know what the fuck I was doing, and it made me unhealthy and weird. I'd never felt family until him, so it's nice to be accountable and responsible for someone else. I used to consider it a triggering burden, but with him I'm just all too happy to do it, and vice versa.

PLAYBOY: Why did it feel like a burden?

JAMIL: I lost myself in other people. I still have a tendency to do that, but I was conditioned very young to be of service to other people and was explicitly told it was the point of my existence, so it makes complete sense that I would end up being an activist. I've been an activist since I was 19. I come from a lineage of very mentally ill people, and I was the sole caretaker of all of them since I was 12. I've wanted to help people because I feel I don't have a choice. It's beyond a calling; it's a duty.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of activism, you're passionate about climate change. How do you feel about Trump trying to take on Greta Thunberg via Twitter?

JAMIL: I don't understand his stance on climate change at all. We couldn't have more evidence of how much humans are destroying the planet. All I know is that if he really didn't think it was real, he wouldn't be threatened by a child speaking out on it. His actions indicate fear; otherwise he would just ignore her. Greta is one of the most important people of our time, and we are so lucky that this unspeakably brave young person is dedicating her life to waking up the world. Greed is what is blinding these powerful politicians who value money over the well-being of our planet. Part of that comes from the fact that they're all so old and they know they won't be here by the time the worst of the damage is done.

The worst thing Taylor Swift ever did was not fuck up, and people hate her for that.

PLAYBOY: How will you get involved with the upcoming U.S. election as a noncitizen?

JAMIL: I will just be encouraging people to vote. I will be encouraging people to educate themselves on policy. I believe marginalized people and young people are deliberately not encouraged to be politically engaged because they're the ones with the power to turn things around in their best interests. That needs to change. They need to step into their power and fight together to create a safer world to grow up in.

PLAYBOY: Do you miss London?

JAMIL: I miss aspects of London, but London is in such a strange place right now politically. In Los Angeles you kind of exist in this weird little bubble, this super progressive area where there's so much love and so many gay people and multiracial couples. It just feels safe here. Whereas in London, the discomfort is everywhere, like the fact that Muslim girls get acid thrown in their faces on the street there. I love my people, and I'm supporting them in the ways that I can, encouraging them to vote and take control of their lives.

But in my line of work, London is still behind in racial diversity. We're still

behind in giving women important jobs that lead to long-standing, dignified careers. The rest of us either get pushed out or get pushed into being nothing more than sex objects, whether we want that or not. Whereas I remember coming to America five years ago and seeing Robin Roberts hosting *Good Morning America* and knowing that Oprah is a really big deal here. Oprah would never have made it in the U.K. I couldn't believe I was seeing women in their 50s and 60s of different races on the biggest shows on U.S. television. That was a big moment, realizing if I wanted to continue in this industry, I would have to come here, because otherwise I'd be sent to the glue factory.

PLAYBOY: How did you make the choice to move to L.A.?

JAMIL: I'd always loved Los Angeles because I grew up obsessed with films. I worked in a video store for four years. I'd always planned on coming here at some point, just to live even for a couple of months, but I never did because I fell into that trap of listening to the fearmongers when you're a woman in this industry. You're told someone else is going to take your spot and you can never be unavailable. I didn't take a single holiday for six years, because I was scared. Especially when you're brown in such a white male industry — which the television industry is in England — you feel lucky to be in any room.

When I was 28, I had a lump in my breast, and I had to wait a week for test results to find out if it was cancer or not. So I made a fuck-it list, and number one on that list was to move to California with no further plans. I found out it wasn't cancerous, but I had to have an operation. You're not allowed to fly until six weeks after the operation, so I booked my one-way ticket then: no plans, no visa, no money. I'd spent most of my money on charity and had also just generally mismanaged my finances because I was mentally ill and didn't have a business manager. I was a fucking idiot when I was younger. Still a fucking idiot now sometimes.

PLAYBOY: What has it been like having your real life equated with that of your *Good Place* character, Tahani Al-Jamil?

JAMIL: So fucking annoying. It triggers me really badly and upsets me. Obviously there are similarities — we have the same hair and makeup style because I did my own makeup on the show; I'd rather sleep than sit in the makeup chair for an hour and 45 minutes. I'm also English and a person with privilege who is trying to work within philanthropy. And I'm attention-seeking because you have to be in order to bring attention to a big subject that needs to be addressed and has been willfully ignored. So I understand where some of the similarities come from, but people think *The Good Place* is a fucking documentary. I'm trapped by that. It's the criticism most leveled at me, which I find very reductive and irritating. Say what you want about my ignorance, but don't compare me to a fictitious character who couldn't be further from who I am. She's very driven by what other people think of her, whereas I couldn't give a flying fuck.

PLAYBOY: How do you behave on set?

JAMIL: I'm chatty and inappropriate and I snack a lot because there's a lot of waiting around. I had very bad gas during season one of *The Good Place* because American snacks are no joke. Why do you put corn syrup in everything? My director's assistant didn't know what had hit me. The fear of farting on Kristen Bell was worse than the fear of acting badly. She's so small, she's nearer my asshole than I am, so it'll hit her first and worst. It weirdly got me through my fear of acting opposite her since I'd never acted professionally before *The Good Place*.

PLAYBOY: Do you have dream roles? Do you want to play a superhero?

JAMIL: I want to do the things I've never seen South Asians do. But I don't want to be a superhero, because I hate running. I pulled out of a giant action movie last year because I didn't want to run. I have no business being in an action role — I know my limits. There's another Asian out there I'm making space for, and she can come in and do that. She can run. There was this scene in *The Good Place* of a big fight, and Janet kicks everyone's ass. Everyone was featured in the fight sequence, but the producers decided that I would hide behind the pool table and watch everyone else fight. It took five days to shoot the fucking scene, and I pulled a muscle in my ass because I was sitting there for so long. I left being the only member of the cast who sustained an injury during the sequence, and I was the only one who didn't fight. I was actually inactive for so long that I got injured.

PLAYBOY: You presented Taylor Swift with her *Billboard* Women in Music Award in December. How does it feel knowing she looks to you for inspiration?

JAMIL: I find it wild when anyone has heard my words. I met Taylor Swift 10 years ago when she was trying to break into England, and she's been nothing but incredibly supportive. The worst thing Taylor Swift ever did was not fuck up, and people hate

her for that. There's something so unrelatable about a child star who doesn't end up on heroin or piss into a mop bucket. It's like, Who the fuck are you to come up with manners and grace? When I was standing there listening to her speak and watching the way she was to me and everyone else, I was perplexed by her reputation. I couldn't marry it to the woman in front of me at all.

PLAYBOY: How does it feel after you decide to share on social media?

JAMIL: It's a wonderful release. I'm so far away from humanity, but I feel I'm inching closer and closer every time I tell the truth. It started in micro truths, my version of microaggressions. Things like getting the wrong order at a coffee shop and saying, "I'm sorry, this is actually the wrong order. May I please have the thing I wanted?" It started in restaurants and coffee shops, where I advise all people to start. Then I would slowly gear up the courage to tell more and more different kinds of people they were doing something that did not fit with what I wanted. But it started with coffee orders.

I haven't really had a bad reaction to telling people I want more. If anything, I've had a great reaction, to the point where I've realized why women have been told not to ask: Because when you ask, sometimes you actually get what you've asked for, and they didn't want us to know that. They told us never to ask, because you're likely to fucking get it. For the past two years James has been amazing at pushing me to ask for more money. I walked away from a big show I really wanted. Three times I said no to the offers, even though I was scared they were going to tell me, "Fine, we'll go find someone else." But I did it. I stuck to my guns, and then I got the money I wanted and got equal pay with all the men I would be working with.

PLAYBOY: Has this ever cost you professionally?

JAMIL: Yes. I've spoken out against toxic people at the top and gone to HR and then shortly after lost a job I was up for within the same company. I've cost myself millions of dollars. I'm doing okay financially right now, but I would be so rich if I had put my principles aside and worked with the beauty and weight-loss-product companies that have wanted me to endorse them for a decade. I would own six houses. I own zero houses because of my stupid fucking principles.

I don't want to be part of the poison that poisoned me when I was younger and made me crazy. So I've very much bitten the hand that feeds me. I've made enemies everywhere because I tell the truth. I'm a whistle-blower, which is just a fancy term for tattletale. I think it's genuinely why I've never been sexually harassed in this business. I've been sexually harassed outside it, but in this business it's been very clear from the outset that I don't have a filter.

PLAYBOY: Many of your tweets create polarizing reactions, and sometimes you'll admit that you shouldn't have weighed in on a topic. How do you come to that conclusion?

JAMIL: I don't nail it all the time. I've taken and eaten a lot of Ls — so many embarrassing mistakes. I've fucked up, but I promise to be better and more aware. In November there was a controversy between me and the rapper CupcakKe when she said she'd been on a monthlong water fast and showed gorgeous photographs of herself after this fast. I didn't research her. What asshole in my position doesn't research who I'm talking about, especially when that woman is marginalized? A stressed-out chaotic moron, that's who. I was mortified that I didn't know this was someone who was suicidal, mentally ill. I thought I was saying it with love, but I didn't know who I was talking to. And that happens all the time. I'm changing strategy for this next decade to be more careful, more of a grown-up, to accept that there's a lot to catch up with. And now it's so on me.

I own zero houses because of my stupid fucking principles.

PLAYBOY: A lot of people online, especially influencers, do share those weightloss products with their audiences. I'm talking about Kim Kardashian.

JAMIL: Never heard of her.

PLAYBOY: Or Kylie Jenner.

JAMIL: Never heard of her.

PLAYBOY: Seriously, I'm wondering how you feel about being in an industry with people who do things you find not just wrong but personally offensive.

JAMIL: Heinous. I feel sullied by it, and that's why I rage so hard against it as my emotional version of a carbon footprint. I'm trying to level out the fact that I am participating in this. I've been an activist for 14 years, and I was never able to change laws and policies until I was in this industry — until I was in the belly of the beast. Even when people don't like the things I talk about, they're fucking talking about them. I start big global conversations. I rage hard against it to try to undo all the toxicity. This industry was responsible for so much of my self-hatred when I was younger. I know the exact impact of the behavior of everyone in this industry, behavior they engage in because they're driven by corporate greed.

I can't believe the things I didn't know. When I was 26 and a radio DJ, I got super fat-shamed for months on magazine covers —pictures of my thighs, ass, bare buttocks. They'd get a photograph of me picking up my house keys outside my front door at seven a.m., and that photo has lived on and on and on. Paparazzi would stalk me outside my house and call me a fat cunt, trying to provoke a reaction from me. People would roll down their car window and scream at me that they hate me now that I'm fat. It was insane, and my Twitter was a mess.

But that's when I realized how we treat fat women. At that point, I hadn't been fat in years, and I'd never been fat and famous. I've been skinny and famous because I had a serious eating disorder. To see how disgustingly we dehumanize and berate and abuse fat women, even when you're on the radio — that made me realize I had to kick up the fight against fat phobia. That's when my activism became stronger, and I started speaking in Parliament and doing all these things. There are speeches on the internet that I made eight years ago.

PLAYBOY: I've watched some of those.

JAMIL: It's so frustrating when people think I took this up after *The Good Place*. There are receipts all over the fucking internet that I've been saying this for years. I've been a fucking broken record for 10 years. After I gained all the weight, I was flooded with endorsement offers from weight-loss programs,

saying, "We want to take you out on the beach and get humiliating photographs of you with your stomach out, eating a burger, running. We want you as unflattering as possible. Then we're going to chart your weight-loss success and sell a DVD and a diet off the back of it." When we see those pictures of celebrities at the beach followed by three months of speedy progress, they're being paid to do that, and they're being paid for the humiliating photographs we see in the *National Enquirer* and *Daily Mail*. It's a marketing tactic.

PLAYBOY: You've said you don't want to talk about body positivity anymore. Why is that?

JAMIL: First of all, body positivity is a sociopolitical movement that's not for me, right? I'm a straight-size woman, and that movement was created out of pure vital necessity, because women have to love something that society hates so much and for which they're medically discriminated against. My polycystic ovary syndrome was missed because I was chubby, and my friends have had endometriosis misdiagnosed because they were chubby. We get fat-shamed by our own doctors. You don't get jobs; you don't get to date as much. You don't get treated with basic human fucking dignity and respect out in the streets. Body positivity is a response to extreme measures of hatred and discrimination. A straight-size person taking space in that movement is hugely unethical. And as someone who was obsessed with my figure for decades, body positivity is still me thinking about my body. I'm still locked in the cage. Whether I love it or hate it, I don't want to think about it. My boyfriend isn't thinking about his body; he's getting shit done.

But because my body's been such a priority, I can't love and love and love something, especially not something society has programmed me to hate, which is reinforced every time I open my phone. There is either subliminal or very aggressive messaging built to tell me that there's something wrong with me, that I'm old and fat and wrong and ugly, so I can't love this. Body positivity for me is too fucking hard, and a lot of people feel that way regardless of their size. I fucking love the idea that we ought to stand in front of a mirror and love ourselves. I hope I get there, but I'm nowhere near that yet. I still have severe body dysmorphia, so I'd rather not engage. I'm into body neutrality: This is just my car that I get in to go around.

So I've made more money, I've gotten more things done, I've become a better friend, I've become a better lover. I am a better person for disengaging from my obsession. For too many women, it is an obsession. So if it's your obsession, I suggest, at least as a first step before body positivity, don't try to get all the way to love. Just get to acceptance and then love. There's pressure to love ourselves no matter what, in spite of all this hatred, and I get it, but it's fucking hard for some of us.

PLAYBOY: How do you respond to people who think I Weigh is a body-positivity movement?

JAMIL: People think it's a body-positive movement because the press keeps willfully describing it as that, no matter how many times I've said it's not. I actually request beforehand in all interviews, "Please don't announce me as this. Please don't talk about it as this. It's a mental-health movement; it's not a body-positive movement." But they place me in it because we have a habit of placing thin women in the body-positive movement. We want to have the conversation, but we don't want to show a picture of a fat woman on a magazine cover. I've tried to get fat women on covers with me, and men told me, "Then you can't have the cover." So my principle says, "Okay, then fuck you." But if I don't do it, no one has that conversation, because the next actress on that cover sure as shit isn't going to talk about it. They're going to stay in their fucking lane.

So then I end up taking space. If not me, then who? It's this frustrating situation we see a lot with poverty, where someone with privilege talks about the injustice, and we tell them to shut the fuck up. If we don't listen to the poor, and we also won't listen to the privileged, then who gets to speak?

PLAYBOY: As the message spreads and grows, how will you convey that it belongs not just to this one representative but to myriad people?

JAMIL: Not everyone's going to get this immediately. I look like the fucking enemy. I'm slim. All of a sudden I'm conventionally attractive, even though until now South Asians were a big no-no. But brown is suddenly in. I've suddenly entered into privilege in that area — the "pretty privilege" or whatever the fuck they call it — after years of being called a monkey and a curry-smelling Paki on Twitter when I was on television. But I know my end goal and my intentions. I have to just let them distrust me and dislike me and keep going, because we all have the same end goal. We can't fucking nitpick each other over it all the time.

What I'm now building, what I've spent all my money on in the past year, is hiring women to help me tell the stories of other people so they can tell their own stories in their own dignified ways. We're launching a platform of storytelling, be it via video or written word or podcasts. I needed to get loud and take up space to get this much power and privilege so that I now have the power to create space for other people. But you have to let someone get up there first so they can open the fucking door.

I'm just a very curious cat— except I've never tried booze, coke or bum sex.

PLAYBOY: What else is on the horizon?

JAMIL: I'm launching my own company, which is terrifying. I've never been a CEO before, but with I Weigh I'm having to learn business, learn the ins and outs of the incredibly litigious American system, learn about changing laws and bills and policies. I just want to know how badly I can fuck this up. Like when I speak openly about abortion, I want to know what's going to happen if I just tell the whole truth. My dad always used to say, "Look, they're not going to take you out in the street and shoot you." So I've always had that as an absurd limit: "Well, as long as I'm not going to be literally shot...." I'm just a very curious cat — except that I've never tried booze, coke or bum sex. For those, I'm okay never finding out. ■

"Have you been avoiding me?"

TICKET TO RIDE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
GRAHAM DUNN

May Playmate **Savannah Smith** is equal parts model and grease monkey — and living proof that such distinctions are irrelevant. Join her as she demonstrates the richness of human endeavor and a passion for using her platform

As a recreational mechanic, I wouldn't advise changing your brake pads without gloves on...but oddly enough I feel entirely in my element posing nude in an auto body shop.

To me, this photo shoot illustrates the duality of my personality. There's my soft, feminine side, and there's my boyish side that loves working on cars and used to play rugby and chop down trees. I grew up in a hippie town outside Athens, Georgia. We lived in the woods in a house my dad bought when he was 24. He was a cameraman and field producer for a hunting and fishing show, and my brother and I were homeschooled so we could travel with him on the job . I didn't like homeschooling at first — I remember thinking, Dang, I wish I had the experience of being with a big pack of kids — but in hindsight I'm grateful for the independence it afforded me. Without the pressure of being a cookie-cutter high school kid I was able to become the self-possessed person I am today. In fact, I was such a strong-willed child that my mom's friends used to joke, "You need to put her in boarding school!" to which my mom always responded, "I am never going to tell her to not be this way. No matter what, nobody's going to be able to boss her around."

It turns out my mom was right: The moment I set my mind on modeling as my profession there was no convincing me otherwise. Because my dad was a cameraman, I wanted to model from an early age. Starting at about four years old I would dress in themed outfits and give him art direction ("Take my picture *here!"*). I used to beg my parents to take me to auditions. They supported the idea, but they didn't think of modeling as a real full-time career path. So when I was 19, I googled *open casting calls in Atlanta* and drove myself to the city without telling anybody. I signed with my first agency that day.

After a few years, I started to feel conflicted about modeling. I struggled with the idea of working in an industry that was by its nature self-serving. But then there was a huge shift when Trump got elected and the #MeToo movement took off. It's like the pendulum swung the other way, a nd instead of being silent, everyone in the industry became empowered to use their voices. A switch went off in my head, and I realized that modeling could give me a platform to reach people and talk about the issues I'm passionate about. So I freaking love it now!

My goal moving forward is to keep building my platform and using my resources to empower and enrich young lives. I was a preschool teacher for four years, and whether or not those kids remember me now, my mission was to show each child they were loved, respected and, most important, heard. I believe the reason I've always felt empowered is that I had people who really listened to me as a child and showed me my opinion was valued . You have your whole life to learn new things, but you can't re-create a happy childhood — and those missed opportunities contribute to our broken system.

I want to use my voice to help prompt a dialogue within society and within families. I want to combat voices that bring down self-esteem and capitalize on shame. I want to help build a world where connection and empathy are the currency of success.

And at some point along the way I'd love to become a newwave Martha Stewart with a Jeep Wagoneer.

a drink *with* daveed diggs

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GRANT SPANIER**

The Hamilton breakout and Snowpiercer star peers into the future—of manhood, humanity and much in between

BY **IRA MADISON III**

Daveed Diggs is drinking bourbon on the rocks — Woodford Reserve, to be exact — as we sit in a 1970s-chic booth at the popular East Los Angeles bar Blind Barber. The drink is one you might associate with a laid-back man's man at ease and in the moment. And though the signifiers from a bygone era are fitting, they hardly sum up the person in front of me.

Diggs appears to be at home here but not because he subscribes to some rakish Rat Pack ideal. The 38-year-old Oakland native was raised to embrace a more complex sense of identity. That much is apparent when you meet him, with his omnipresent grin and abundant Afro of curls.

The performer, who came up in theater and landed Grammy and Tony awards for his work in the Broadway megahit *Hamilton*, is uniquely qualified to usher in a new future for depictions of masculinity. This May he'll star in TNT's *Snowpiercer* — a television adaptation of the 2013 sci-fi film from director Bong Joon Ho (whose latest movie, *Parasite*, made him the only person of color nominated for a 2020 best-director Oscar). Diggs co-wrote and starred in his own film — 2018's *Blindspotting*, earning him an Independent Spirit Award nomination for acting — but with the new gig he's finally getting the opportunity to show his version of a mainstream leading man. For Diggs, this evolution comes with the responsibility to make good use of his growing platform.

"The value of black life has been displayed for us so much in the past few years, and it's been pretty disheartening," he says. "All the ways we thought we might have been valued turn out to be not true. And then we have people in power who are not disheartened by that and, in fact, are playing right into it. If you have an election coming up, it's fucking stressful."

His sense of innate human value likely came from his father, whom Diggs describes as having "never withheld a demonstration of love to anybody," particularly not to him and his brother. Diggs told Esquire in 2016 that his dad "doesn't necessarily identify as gay, but I've known my father's boyfriends [throughout] my life." As Diggs tells playboy, "We lived in dangerous places, but I never felt unsafe with my father around. Strength and emotion were not opposites. They were all in one man for me, and in one man without a heteronormative identity."

Stemming from this, he's adamant about remembering where he came from. "It's an interesting thing to make art for a place that doesn't exist," Diggs says, speaking of an Oakland that's nearly unrecognizable from the place where he grew up. "Oakland is changing so fast, and most of the people I grew up with live elsewhere. Even if they're still in the Bay and still claim it, they live on the outskirts and come into Oakland to hang out sometimes."

Set in his hometown, *Blindspotting* tackles themes of memory and loss — the latter due in this case to gentrification and displacement of natives. Although it's set far, far away from Oakland, *Snowpiercer* grapples with similar themes: A failed global-warming experiment kills much of the planet, plunging it into ice and carving ever-deepening divisions between the haves and the have-nots.

The idea of using science fiction to confront real-world concerns has always interested Diggs, a self-proclaimed *Star Trek* fan. "Fucking climate change scares the shit out of me right now," he says. "*Snowpiercer* barely seems like scifi at this point."

If there's another thread running through Diggs's projects — which will soon include the Showtime limited series *The Good Lord Bird*, in which he plays Frederick Douglass — it's that he wants to choose characters who continue to push our cultural conversation forward. (He'll also put his spin on a beloved crustacean when he voices Sebastian in Disney's remake of *The Little Mermaid*.) "I don't like to play in worlds where stupidity is excused or justified or is part of the world," Diggs says, emphasizing his preference for complex studies of human desires and conflicts.

That's true even when they're controversial. Take his recent turn in the off-Broadway play *White Noise*: In last year's buzzy production from Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, his character has an encounter with the police and then asks his white friend to be his owner in order to feel safer in the world. It is dangerous territory for a play to explore, but Diggs loves working with black artists who have something to say about race and politics in America. Among those who earn his praise: *Moonlight* co-writer Tarell Alvin McCraney, poet Chinaka Hodge ("my favorite writer of words"), 2019 Pulitzer-winning playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury and *Slave Play* playwright (and Fall 2019 *Playboy Interview* subject) Jeremy O. Harris.

Diggs has learned a lot shooting *Snowpiercer* scenes alongside his Oscar-winning co-star Jennifer Connelly—lessons that will come in handy as he seeks to increase his impact outside of the New York theater scene that incubated his career.

"Music these days has become accessible to everybody, and that's good, so I always want to keep making music," he says. (In addition to his many acting projects, Diggs fronts the hip-hop group Clipping.) "That's another reason it's important to work in TV and film: Those are actually more accessible than theater in a lot of ways. Even if I'm sort of uncomfortable with them, I want to figure out ways to tell the important stories by those means."

Talk of the future raises another question: Has his father's evolved masculinity inspired Diggs to raise a family of his own? The artist says he "desperately" wants to have kids and explains how his creative choices will factor into the herculean task of fatherhood.

"Raising black kids in the world, I want them to be less afraid than I was," he says. "I wonder, What the hell kind of place am I bringing a kid into, and is that okay? That's stressful, and it also makes me want to keep making art that's important and speaks to those things."

He concludes the thought on a note that would surely make his father proud. "I want the world to be better for my children, whenever they get here."

TV and film are more accessible than **theater.** Even if i'm sort of **uncomfortable** with them, I want to figure out ways to tell the **important stories** by those means."

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Alina KONOVALOVA

@ALINABURJKHALIFA

Photography by **TASHA MANAENKOVA | @TASHA_MANAENKOVA**

Tell us something interesting about yourself people would not ordinarily know about you.
I love Dubai. Often I live there. I travel a lot around the world. I visit 10 different countries or more per month. About 25 flights per month.

If you weren't a model, what would you be?
I want a construction business.

Who is your celeb crush?
I am a star

What is the one thing about yourself that you wish more people knew?
Many children

What does your typical day look like?
photoshoots. Plane. Sea. seafood. And a lot of black caviar.

When you are not busy modelling, what is your favourite thing to do?
I like photo shoots for magazines or well-known companies.

Which three words best describe you?
Beautiful, smart, sexy.

Were you excited to shoot this feature?
No. I live like this every day.

Do you have anyone special in your life? Tell us a bit more.
To be special for me, for this he must do something special.

Where to from here? What are your plans for the future?
The plan is grandiose. But while he is a secret. I can only say that I will travel a lot.

The Lure of a Locked Door

A PASTORAL ADVENTURE OF LAPINOT AND RICHARD BY LEWIS TRONDHEIM

HEY, RICHARD! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

CLACK

I'M SNOOPING...

CLACK CLACK

STOP! WE DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO THOSE ROOMS. THE PEOPLE RENTING US THIS HOUSE PROBABLY STORE THEIR THINGS IN THERE.

HUH? LET ME JUST TRY!

CLACK CLACK CLACK CLACK

KNOWLEDGE IS VERY IMPORTANT— A CLOSED DOOR IS LIKE A BURNING LIBRARY...

THAT'S BALONEY! THE REAL AFRICAN PROVERB IS "WHEN AN OLD MAN DIES, A LIBRARY BURNS."

SAME THING!

I'M GOING TO TRY TO OPEN IT WITH MY OWN HOUSE KEYS.

OKAY, COOL... THAT'LL KEEP YOU OCCUPIED FOR AT LEAST 15 MINUTES.

CLICK

KNOCK KNOCK

HA HA HA!

I GOT IT OPEN ON MY FIRST TRY.

WAIT! DON'T DO ANYTHING STUPID. SOMEONE'S KNOCKING ON THE FRONT DOOR.

WOWWW, SO MUCH STUFF!!!

HELLO. I AM LUC GROLLET, THE HOMEOWNER. I'VE COME TO SEE IF YOU'RE ENJOYING YOUR STAY AND IF YOU NEED ANYTHING.

HEY! COME SEE WHAT I FOUND WHILE SNOOPING...

!!!

I CAN'T COME! I'M SPEAKING WITH THE OWNER.

YOU KNOW, THE OWNER OF THIS HOUSE AND EVERYTHING IN IT.

AND HE'S BIG AND BUFF.

VOILÀ.....

WHAT DID HE FIND?

I DON'T KNOW.

HA HA HA

HIS BRAIN?

REALLY!!

RICHARD!

THE OWNER OF THIS HOUSE AND EVERYTHING IN IT IS ASKING WHAT YOU FOUND.

15355771

HEY, I COULDN'T HEAR YOU... I WAS READING AN OLD PLAYBOY I FOUND!

WE COULD PRANK A DOCTOR BY LEAVING IT IN THEIR WAITING ROOM.

WHO'S THIS?

MR. GROLLET, THE OWNER OF THIS PLACE.

!!!

THE OWNER? DID YOU COME BACK FOR A CHANGE OF UNDERWEAR?

HEY! THAT WOULDN'T BE ONE OF MY PLAYBOY MAGAZINES, WOULD IT?

OOOOOH... NO... I FOUND IT AT A... YARD SALE, IN A PILE OF OLD BIBLES, AND IT WAS CALLING TO ME "HELP, HELP..."

OH REALLY? I'M STILL GOING TO CHECK MY CLOSET TO SEE IF MY COPY IS THERE.

HEY! YOUR NAME IS GROLLET - LIKE THE MIDDLE AGES FARMER FROM AROUND HERE WHO KILLED THE LORD OF THE MANOR?

I'M A DESCENDANT OF HIS, YES...

STAY HERE! I'M GOING TO FIND A PIECE OF PAPER TO GET YOUR AUTOGRAPH.

CLICK CLACK

WHAT IS HE TALKING ABOUT, THIS GUY?

WHERE DID HE GO?

GRR... ALL RIGHT.

MY COPY IS HERE!

HEY, I FOUND A PIECE OF PAPER!

YOU CAN SAY, "MR. GROLLET, DESCENDANT OF THE AWFUL 13th CENTURY MURDERER..."

NO!

AH, YEAH, IT DOESN'T SOUND COOL... ALL RIGHT: "MR. GROLLET, DESCENDANT OF THE AWFUL 13th CENTURY MURDERER WHO ALSO HAS A COPY OF PLAYBOY IN HIS HOUSE"?

GRRR...

I HOPE THIS TEACHES YOU A LESSON AND THAT YOU'LL BEHAVE IN THIS HOUSE.

FOR SURE!

HEY! IT'S A REAL WELL!!

I THINK WE CAN CLIMB TO THE BOTTOM USING A MAKESHIFT CORD MADE OUT OF THE LIVING ROOM CURTAINS?

- END OF CHAPTER TWO - KRIS STRONDMAN

Man in His Domain

Compton Cowboys

Where have all the cowboys gone? South Los Angeles, it turns out. A Compton-based nonprofit reframes a whitewashed way of life

BY **ANITA LITTLE**

The morning sun is just beginning to peek out over the horizon, dyeing the sky over Compton a soft pink. Roosters are crowing, announcing the start of a new day on the quiet houselined street. As I step out of my car my first thought is that I must be in the wrong place; there's no way this is the address of a cowboy ranch.

I hear an unfamiliar *clop clop* approaching, and I turn to see a young black man in a hoodie, tatted and with dreadlocks, trotting down the center of the street atop a dark horse — a restless Tennessee walker whose name I'll later find out is Ebony. The man regards me coolly as he saunters past, exhaling a small plume of smoke. He looks no more out of place against this urban backdrop than the cars that cruise alongside. I feel as though I've stepped into an old Western film, albeit one in which the cowboys and cowgirls look less like John Wayne and more like me.

The Compton Cowboys, a group of 10 friends who grew up riding together, operate out of Richland Farms, a two-acre spread tucked behind the houses on this unassuming block. Formally launched less than three years ago, the outfit has made a name for itself in and outside of Compton by reintroducing — yes, reintroducing — cowboy culture to black urban communities.

"The ranch you're on is 30 years of work," says Randall Hook once he has brought me past the gates of his family's rambler and into a broad backyard lined with stables. Also known as Randy Savvy, Hook is the managing member of the Compton Cowboys. "My brother and I were born into the horse thing," he says. The rest of the group consists of friends, family members and curious locals.

Hook inherited Richland Farms from his aunt Mayisha Akbar, a longtime equestrian. In 1988 Akbar founded a youthfocused program called the Compton Junior Posse, which served as a precursor to the Compton Cowboys; it was where many of the current riders met as children trying to escape the dangers of their neighborhood. (Akbar was forced to hand over the reins after she suffered a stroke.)

"It's crazy out there in the streets," says Hook. "I don't even like standing in front of my house. You end up growing up with people, and they get killed or go to jail. You see somebody, then you just never see him again. Riding takes you away from the bullshit of the world and just helps you grow and develop yourself as you naturally would. When you're in the ranch, the bullshit can't see you."

Lil Ant, a Compton Cowboy and former member of the Acacia Blocc Crips gang, says the ranch helped him transition back into society after completing a two-year sentence for drug dealing.

"I'd rather hang with the horses; that's my passion now," he says. "Once you've been in jail, you can't go back to the same thing. I had to change it up. I love my horses, so I picked that."

He eventually purchased a Tennessee walker named Sugarfoot for his young children, who have since become avid riders.

In Compton, Richland Farms is much more than a ranch; it's a major pillar of an underserved community that's often plagued by violence. It's a refuge for Compton youth looking for a place to belong that isn't gang-affiliated, and it's a resource for those same youth to learn leadership skills and build self-esteem. In the confines of this spread, with its 16 horses, three cows and one affable llama, members rehabilitate the often-donated horses and train for rodeo competitions and the showjumping circuit. Watching it all, I feel transported. I feel safe.

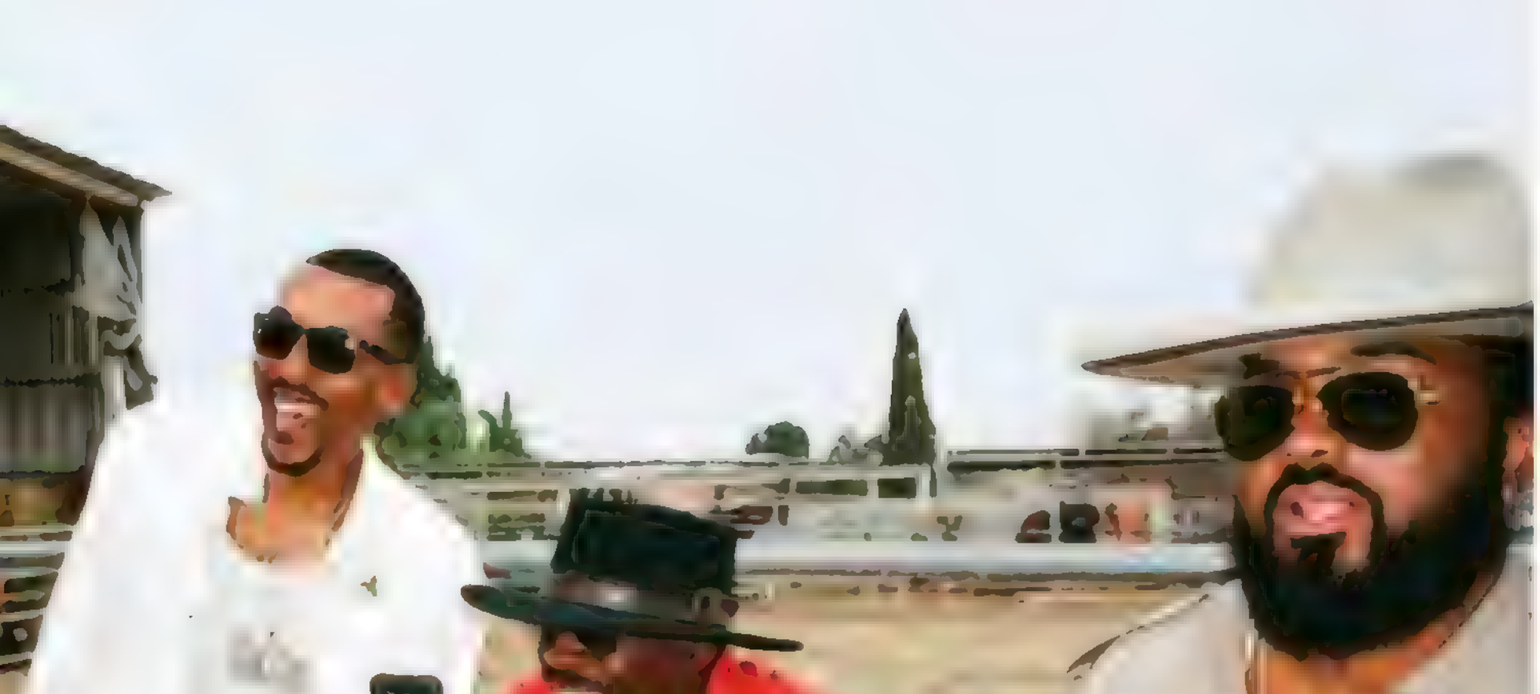
Keiara, the only cowgirl in the Compton Cowboys, competes in rodeos throughout the state. She's often one of the few riders of color out of several hundred. "No one acknowledged me until I started winning," she says.

Hook speaks proudly of one of the program's mentees: "We've got a young kid that came in real rough. Wild, young little boy. He's only been in this for two years now, and he's already winning rodeos out of state as a teenager. Talk to him now, he wants to be a professional bull rider. He wears his belt buckle to school."

He goes on: "His mom, she hit me up, saying, 'You saved my son's life. Thank you.' If you're able to change one life, you've already made it."

The Compton Cowboys' slogan — Streets Raised Us, Horses Saved Us — feels especially fitting in light of stories like this. But horses don't pay rent. How can the Cowboys keep the stable doors open without compromising their

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID LEKACH**



Opening pages, from left: Compton Cowboys CeeJay, Randy Savvy, Keiara, Stona Mane, Tre Hosley, Lay, T-Man, Carlton and Lil Ant **This page, from top:** Lay, T-Man, CeeJay and Randy Savvy at Richland Farms; Tre in the paddock, Stona Mane, Lil Ant and T-Man saddling up

mission amid the city's constant socioeconomic stampedes?

• • •

When Hook became manager of the ranch, he was saddled with a deep financial responsibility. "I'm always pressed for operating dollars," he says.

Taking care of horses isn't cheap: Akbar typically raised $30,000 a month in funding, mostly from wealthy white patrons, to keep the operation running. The biggest challenge to her successor is making the ranch financially independent. Hook, who had recently earned his master's degree in music administration when he took over, decided they would rely less on others' largesse than on the ranch's cowboy coolness — raising revenue through storytelling and branding.

"You can go door to door and it'll take you some time, but you can get the word out," Hook says. "Or you could do one fucking commercial, and now you're in front of millions of people in 60 seconds."

Over the past year and a half, the Compton Cowboys have focused on becoming a self-sustaining enterprise, signing advertising deals with companies from Guinness and Adidas to Zara and Boot Barn, with even more in the pipeline. Their website boasts a wide collection of original merch — compton cowboys emblazoned in Old English lettering across beanies and hoodies. The group has a self-titled book coming in mid-spring from HarperCollins. And an upcoming feature film based on their lives, written by Prentice Penny, the showrunner behind HBO's *Insecure*, will be backed by Fox Searchlight Pictures. The Cowboys are well on their way to household-name status.

Hook is struggling to decide whether becoming a pop-culture phenomenon will actually translate into the longevity they need to preserve their way of life — a way of life both well established and almost entirely erased.

• • •

Most Americans would be surprised to learn that black riders are nothing new; they were an integral part of the Old West. The Compton Cowboys are simply a continuation of a centuries-long legacy that has been painstakingly excised from our country's history.

Roger Hardaway, a professor of history at Northwestern Oklahoma State University and an expert on the Old West, has dedicated much of his scholarship to unearthing the forgotten story of black cowboys. He paints a picture of Texas, a former slave state where countless stray cattle, abandoned by owners who left to fight in the Civil War, roamed the Great Plains.

"They belonged basically to nobody, so you could make some money rounding them up," Hardaway says. "This created thousands of cowboy jobs, and a lot of African Americans took those jobs. They had room and board all taken care of, and they'd make maybe $15 a month, which was a lot of money for somebody who was single."

For recently freed male slaves, becoming a cowboy was the best job they could hope for. They migrated west in droves. At the height of the industry, before the advent of the railroad eliminated the need for long-distance cattle drives, an estimated one in four cowboys was black.

"It was a magical transition to go from a Southern farm to a Texas range," says Hardaway.

It wasn't just the Old West: African Americans also made their presence known in the high-society culture of horse racing, often placing in the winners' circle at the Kentucky Derby in the event's first three decades. But by the early 1900s Jim Crow had forced them out.

In Hollywood one would be hard-pressed to find a nonwhite cowboy in any of the classic Westerns offering steely-eyed Eastwoods and Elliotts gripping six-shooters and glaring at the camera from beneath wide-brimmed Stetsons. This despite the long-held belief (disputed by some historians) that *The Lone Ranger,* the iconic saga that spanned radio, TV and the big screen starting in the 1930s, was based on the true story of Bass Reeves, a freed slave who made his fortune hunting outlaws in the Wild West.

"In the Hollywood context, the removal of black cowboys serves to deny the important black contributions on the cutting edge of frontier expansion," says Artel Great, a historian of black cinema and a film studies professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. "The image of the valiant white cowboy dominates the nation's social imagination, encouraging viewers to reverse the harsh and bitter truths of America's violent history."

Great adds that we should reinterrogate the term *cowboy* itself. "Black ranch hands were not called cattlemen like their white counterparts but rather were pejoratively deemed cowboys, perpetuating the racist practice of referring to black men as boys."

There's something powerful and subversive about the image of a black body atop a horse. As I watch the Compton Cowboys

Below: Kee living the brand—merchandise is an increasingly important part of the Cowboys' business model. **Opposite:** A lone rider surveys the sun rising over Compton.

practice in their small paddock against a backdrop of graying sky, I immediately understand why such images were scrubbed from America's tracks, screens and history books.

• • •

But the whitewashed narrative of the West is shifting. The past few years have seen a resurgence of African Americans reclaiming the ranch aesthetic and making it their own. Solange and Beyoncé have used cowboy imagery in their recent projects: "Daddy Lessons," Bey's hit from *Lemonade*, features the singer's first foray into the country music genre, and Solange's visual component to the album *When I Get Home* borrows symbolism commonly associated with her home state of Texas. Megan Thee Stallion, Cardi B and other tastemakers helped make chaps the fashion statement of 2019. And of course there's Lil Nas X, the artist whose single "Old Town Road" likely played the biggest part in the black cowboy's emergence into the internet mainstream.

This all coalesced with the birth of the #YeeHawAgenda, a viral hashtag created by Bri Malandro, who's often described as a "pop culture archivist." Malandro tells me she didn't learn much about cowboys in school, least of all black cowboys, and wanted to discover the history for herself.

"My first introduction to the American West may have been watching *Walker, Texas Ranger* with my grandmother," Malandro says. "Once I saw how people were reacting to the black cowboy aesthetic — like it was something they'd never seen before — I started to archive those moments."

So the Compton Cowboys find themselves in an opportune moment — but as Hook repeatedly says, they're not just hopping on a trend.

"People think we're new, or they think we're the ones co-opting a popular culture. We've been doing it; our life is this. We just grew up, and we just happen to be here now in line with this moment that's happening."

All the recent attention is fine and dandy to the group, but more than anything it's a means of securing the future of the Cowboys. Hook spends a lot of time thinking about what lies ahead for his band of riders. Much of his cowboy philosophy seems to revolve around being a good steward — of animals and of the community.

"Being a cowboy means being responsible for all things nature," he says. "Being responsible for the stuff that's here before us, paying it forward to the next generation." Judging by the bright-eyed look of a young boy I see running up to the stables as I'm leaving, that's already happening. ■

Victoria LOREN

Model **@THEVICTORIALOREN**

Photography by **NINO BATISTA | @NINOBATISTA**

Hey there,
Victoria Loren
here!
Hope you enjoy
this interview
and feature!
Thank you for
checking it out!

Describe yourself in three words
- Fierce
- Fun
- Quirky

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Absolutely! I love being a part of the Playboy family! It is always an honor to grace the pages of such an iconic magazine!

What was it like starting out as a model?
Honestly, I was super nervous in the beginning. I started out doing a lot of fashion, editorial type shoots. Of course I found my niche at some point and loved the glamour side as well!

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
I would say when you get older, it is so hard to roll with the changes of your body. Your metabolism slows and you have to be really conscious of that.

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
I'd say either working out or watching movies with a nice glass of wine!

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I grew up in the country and love the outdoors. On the other hand, I LOVE to travel to big cities! But definitely a country girl at heart.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
I'd have to say, I think it would be pretty cool to live in Miami! The beaches are so nice there!

Do you have a secret talent?
I do know how to sing but I am extremely shy LOL

A guilty pleasure?
Probably TikTok (I know...embarrassing)

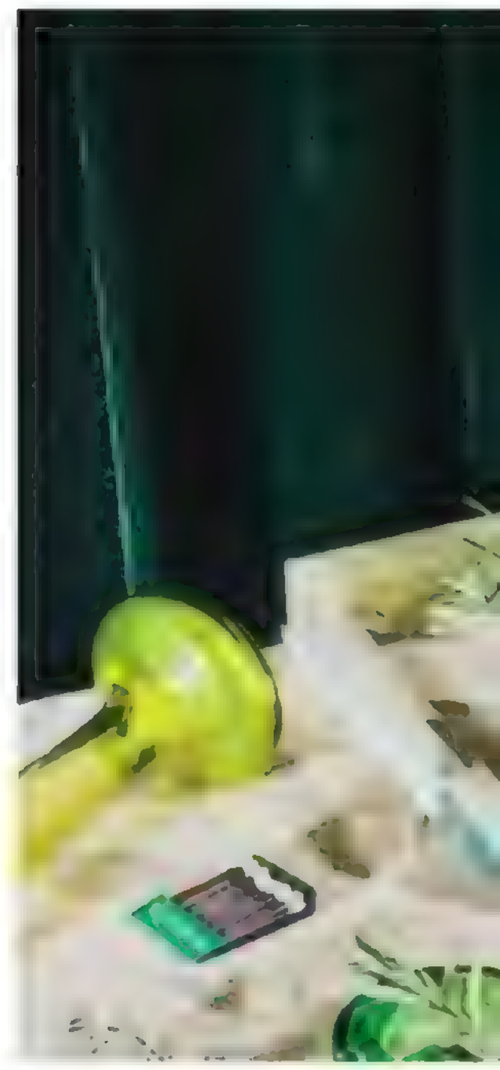
Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
My Little Girl by Tim McGraw

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
Tsoduhi which is beautiful in Cherokee

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Thank you all for your continued support and look for new work on my Instagram @thevictorialoren !!!

NEED
MORE

what's in a name?



The cannabis world ponders whether legalization and scientific advances will put an end to colorfully named strains (looking at you, Sour Diesel)

BY **MICHELLE LHOOQ**

The names of familiar cannabis strains are intertwined with particular phases of my life. I think of them fondly, like old friends: Sour Diesel, the East Coast stalwart that kept me buzzed through college, our covert relationship conducted behind dorm room doors. Panama Red, the old-school hippie I fell in love with one sticky summer in New York. Blue Dream, the ethereal It girl that keeps showing up at parties in Los Angeles. There's a thrill in discovering strains that light up my body's chemistry; intimacy grows with the ones I seek out again and again.

But the allegation, heard in cannabisfriendly circles and the media, that such names are a big scam haunts me. Perhaps this conversation begins with the scientifically backed discovery that classifying strains as sativa or indica is bunk, given that decades of cross-pollination between the two subspecies has transformed most of today's strains into hybrids. Researchers at the University of Northern Colorado's School of Biological Sciences tested the DNA of 30 cannabis strains to find not only that sativa/indica is a false binary but that strains of the same name can display widespread genetic inconsistencies. Even ostensibly identical strains grown by different breeders under variable soil and weather conditions can have divergent chemical profiles. So if two jars of Durban Poison can take on dissimilar tastes and effects when grown by two different brands, does that mean cannabis names reveal absolutely nothing?

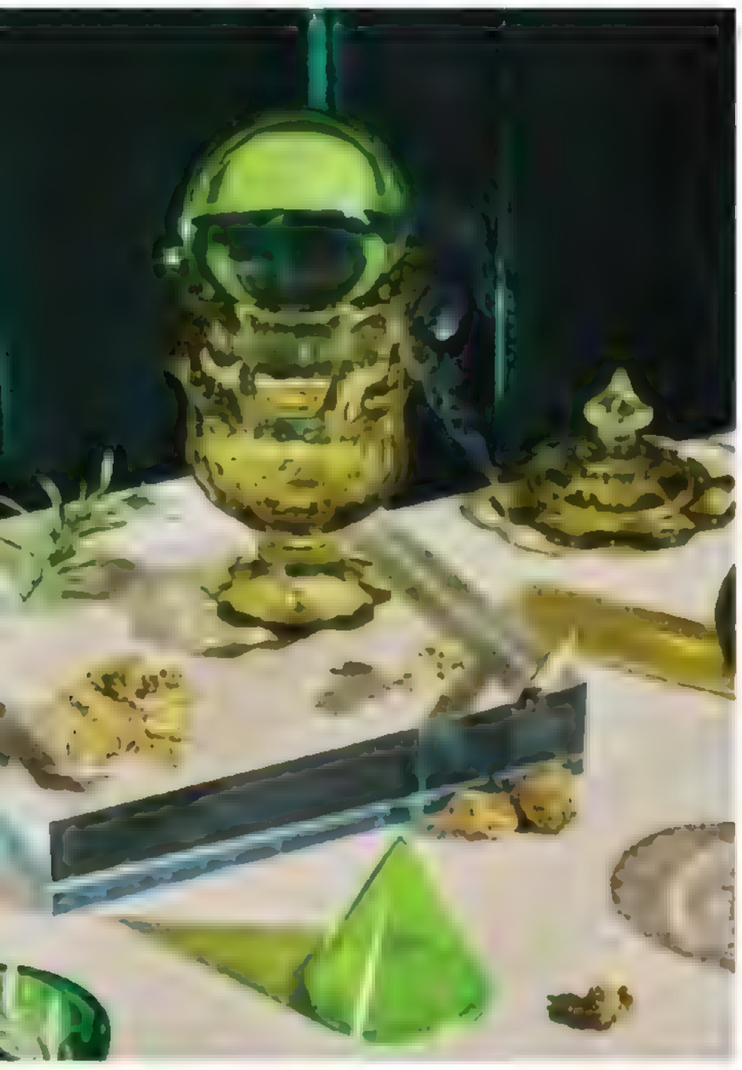
"Names are just not relevant anymore," says Erica Kay, founder and CEO of Cornerstone Wellness dispensary. Back in the day, Kay explains, the cannabis strains believed to be the oldest — Hindu Kush, Afghani, Thai, Aceh and Nepalese — were named after their birthplaces in Central and South Asia. These indigenous strains, known as landraces, were the ancestors to the thousands of hybrids we smoke today — and back then, there were distinct differences between sativas (tall plants with buzzier highs) and indicas (bushy plants with sedative effects). Over generations these landraces were crossbred to bring out desirable traits such as shorter flowering times, higher THC levels and exceptional highs, and the historical differences between sativas and indicas were subsequently blurred.

"Plants have personalities, and cannabis is a diva," says Eleanor Kuntz, co-founder and CEO of plant genetics company LeafWorks, noting how the drug can trace its migration through an incredible array of cultural groups. "I don't know of many other plants that have such a dynamic past." Some cannabis strain names are therefore still useful references to their heritage, including their parent strains or the famous breeders who created them.

Strain names can also reference color, flavor and effect, with the most successful ones birthing new trends. Chemdog, a pioneering 1990s strain popularized at Grateful Dead concerts, was named for its pungent, chemical-like taste; it's believed to have played predecessor to Sour Diesel, which brought skunky-smelling "sativas" back in vogue. Granddaddy Purple sparked the purple-cannabis craze, further promoted in the 2000s and early 2010s with tracks like A$AP Rocky's "Purple Swag" and Cam'ron's album Purple Haze.

And if edgier names like Green Crack and Alaskan Thunderfuck have long basked in notorious glory, the pendulum

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **IAN LORING SHIVER**



is now swinging toward more mainstream- friendly dessert names. "This is largely due to the Girl Scout Cookies phenomenon," explains Pete Pietrangeli, product development manager for Indus Holdings, Inc. Sweet and earthy, known for its orange and purple hues, the Girl Scout Cookie strain preceded the birth of newly popular specimens including Gelato, Sorbet and Wedding Cake. "People love taking a rip and pointing out the similarities in flavor profile," he says.

Other brands, such as Canndescent, eschew conventional names in favor of effect-based ones like Calm, Cruise and Connect. "Having names like Durban Poison and Trainwreck presents a real problem," says Canndescent CEO Adrian Sedlin. "What we've tried to do is take all this counterculture code and then create some meaning that other people can understand."

But as strain names proliferate, there are no regulations to stop a grower or dispensary from selling an average strain under a trendier, higher-value name. Kuntz says, "A broker comes to you and asks, 'What strains do you have?' And your response is, 'What are you buying?' " She continues, "If you can get $200 more a pound for a particular strain name, you'll pass it off as that. There's a lot of fraud, basically."

Of course there are basic government controls on cannabis quality and safety, but unethical labeling can be deadly serious for medical patients seeking particular strains to treat their symptoms. It can also lead to wild marketing, like snake oil salesmen selling strains they claim can kill cancer.

David Bienenstock, veteran cannabis journalist and co-host of the podcast *Great Moments in Weed History*, disagrees. "Strain misidentification definitely happens, but not as much as people think and definitely much less so if you're buying from a licensed dispensary in a legal state," he says. "Often this is an honest mistake, as it's sometimes difficult to verify a strain since so much cannabis breeding took place underground."

Therein lies one of cannabis culture's greatest conundrums: The secrecy and myth that make cannabis history so sexy are exactly what's confounding its current transition to the mainstream market. Without science-backed databases, regulatory watchdogs and well-researched histories, the celebrity-strain industrial complex rests on a murky swamp of unscrupulous marketing and even outright consumer fraud.

Existing databases such as Leafly, Wikileaf and CannaConnection list thousands of strain etymologies, but these resources largely lack scientific merit and regulatory authority. "We do not have the means and methods to verify the consistency of strains, and we heavily depend on the information given by breeders," says CannaConnection's Renzo Alexander. "Many so-called breeders are just commercial companies that buy a certain strain from a wholesale company and give it a new name."

Trust issues continue to dog the industry: A much-hyped attempt to build an accurate strain database led by Phylos Bioscience recently imploded when the company revealed plans to begin its own breeding program. Growers who had submitted genomic data to Phylos were outraged, fearful that their information would be used to develop strains without their consent.

Experts are racing to figure out solutions — especially with the emerging field of cannabis-strain patents. LeafWorks, a newly launched botanical-identification company run by Kuntz and a scientist-led team, developed a DNA test to cross-reference buds against registered strains in their database. LeafWorks partners with a nonprofit herbarium called Canndor to preserve physical specimens in hopes of creating strain definitions verifiable through DNA and documentation. While DNA is not currently required to patent a strain, the company claims this kind of supplemental data lays the groundwork for legal protection.

Beyond the outdated distinction between sativa and indica, the word strain itself may be irrelevant. "Strains are meant to describe microorganisms, like bacteria, fungi and viruses," says Kay. "Chemovars, chemotypes and cultivars are better-accepted terms to describe cannabis." Dr. Ethan Russo, a cannabis research pioneer and medical director of biotechnology company Phytecs, puts it more bluntly: "It has been clear to scientists for a long time that strain names are extremely unreliable."

For now, it seems the best way to beat the strain-name scam is to purchase your cannabis from the same grower at a licensed dispensary — or better yet, grow your own. Until the industry is able to come up with better ways to verify strains, document their histories and form regulatory bodies, a strain by any other name could just be savvy marketing — and would smell as sweet. ■

left for dead

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

Amid right-wing criticism—and a Trump tweet—Universal shelved its film *The Hunt*. Now the director breaks his silence on why everything you know about the movie is wrong

BY **RYAN GAJEWSKI**

Name your favorite thriller of the past year. If *The Hunt* doesn't come to mind, it's not because you're behind the times. The film, which boasts a top-notch cast and filmmaking pedigree, wasn't on your best-of-2019 list because you still haven't seen it — and neither have the people who helped prevent you from seeing it.

Produced by horror master Jason Blum and co-written by Damon Lindelof and Nick Cuse (who both worked on *Watchmen* and *The Leftovers*), The Hunt was set for theatrical release from Universal on September 27. A trailer that dropped in July sketched out a plot in which Betty Gilpin, Emma Roberts and Justin Hartley band together against a diabolical overlord played by Hilary Swank.

On August 3, a shooting motivated by antiimmigrant hatred left 22 people dead in El Paso. Days later, a story from *The Hollywood Reporter* stated that networks were pulling ads for the film in light of the tragedy. As reports surfaced that the plot revolved around liberals hunting conservatives for sport, right-wing pundits pounced. Trump, presumably responding to heavy Fox News coverage, tweeted about the film on August 9 without mentioning it by name. "Liberal Hollywood is racist at the highest level," Trump wrote. "The movie coming out is made in order to inflame and cause chaos."

The day after the president's tweet, Universal announced it was pulling the movie from its schedule. The studio said it stood by the filmmakers, but "now is not the right time to release this film." At press time, The Hunt remains in limbo, with no updates on whether it will see the light of day.

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"There's no way for that not to be a weird day in your life," The Hunt director Craig Zobel tells playboy, reflecting on the Trump tweet. "To have the world aimed at you because the president aimed it at you is a very, very, very strange thing."

It's mid-January, five months after the film's release was canceled, and Zobel has invited me to spend time with him in Philadelphia. He relocated there from Athens, Georgia to take over directing duties on the HBO limited series *Mare of Easttown*. It's his first job since the drama with *The Hunt* led him to take a break from directing. We've been friends since I was his student in a screenwriting class back in 2010, and he's granting me his first press sit-down since the hysteria subsided.

It wasn't easy scheduling this time with the 44-year-old filmmaker. As the furor surrounding his movie started to build in early August, and just days before it was pulled, I e-mailed him to see if he'd like to address the situation. He didn't respond until early October, at which point he apologized for the delay and said he'd love to chat at some point. On the day after Christmas he let me know he had just landed the *Mare* gig and asked if I could fly out to the City of Brotherly Love.

Meeting at a bar around midnight on the night I land, we quickly fall back into a familiar movie-nerd rapport. It's immediately clear that the past year has been an incredibly trying one for Zobel, one he's been unsure about discussing with me despite our long history. (He wasn't the only person reluctant to discuss the film; every one of its leads declined to talk for this piece.) In fact, it wasn't a foregone conclusion that he would accept this current HBO job, and not just because of the *Hunt* turmoil. While he was in post-production on that film, Zobel and his girlfriend of 16 years split, his work schedule and frequent travel having taken a toll on the relationship.

"The breakup happened, and then I was like, 'At least the movie's good,' " he quietly tells me the next day from his office in Sun Center Studios, about half an hour outside downtown Philly. He's been spending his weekends here, holed up in the show's edit bay. "Then the movie blew up. I was like, I'm not prepared to actually do anything right now. When HBO called, I didn't think I was ready at first. Then I reconsidered and thought, Maybe I should work. Maybe that will help. To be honest, it has."

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In early August, when the movie "blew up," Twitter was awash in hot takes.

Some posited that Universal should have expected this kind of uproar. But Zobel assures me the studio never expressed concern before August and had been supportive throughout the filmmaking process, in part, he maintains, because the movie they made is not what people think it is.

"It's a fun, satirical action movie about an internet conspiracy theory," Zobel explains. "The plot is that both sides are dumb. It's not 'Shame on MAGA supporters; we liberal elites want to teach them a lesson.' That was the narrative that truly got created by the rightest of the right-wing media in the wake of the El Paso shooting. Once they needed the message 'It's not guns' fault; it's movies' and video games' and TV's fault,' we were a great foil."

Having read *The Hunt*'s screenplay, I can attest that the project is not what the pitchfork- wielding mobs would have you believe. This is corroborated by filmmaker Josh Locy, one of the very few people who have actually caught a screening.

"When you see the movie — and there are a lot of interpretations of it — to me, it's about liberal hypocrisy," Locy tells me. "The heroes of the movie are the MAGAhat people — they're who you're rooting for. It flips the script."

As it happens, a key plot point involves an online post getting blown out of proportion. "The movie is about how someone on the internet can say one thing, it can get pulled out of context and then lives and careers are at stake," adds Locy, a writer on HBO's *The Righteous Gemstones*. "And that's exactly what Universal did. They let this internet troll, who happens to be our president, dictate their slate of movies. They had an opportunity to embrace free speech and didn't, out of fear."

First and foremost Zobel just wants the damn film to be seen — and clearly he's not the only person who thinks the public should get to make up its own mind. A source familiar with the negotiations tells playboy that Blum's company, Blumhouse Productions, has fielded offers from multiple streaming platforms above the film's $17 million production costs to acquire distribution rights. At the moment Universal still holds those rights.

According to Zobel, more than the nature of the plot has been distorted. A rumor spread in the media and online that the film was originally called *Red State vs. Blue State*, which led Universal to issue a denial that the film had ever held this title. Zobel is still uncertain how the notion started.

"That title became one of the reasons it was seen as such an incendiary, bad movie," the director says. "I remember calling Nick and Damon and asking, 'Was it ever called *Red State vs. Blue State?*' Nick's like, 'No, that's a terrible name for a movie.' So that was just made up, and then I have people tweeting at me, 'You want to make a movie about red state vs. blue state? We'll show you red state vs. blue state.' "

Zobel says he received death threats after Trump's tweet, though he didn't take them too seriously, and they didn't change his mind about the film. "There were Twitter accounts that had been open for three days that had nothing but anti–Craig Zobel tweets," he says. "Still, I absolutely don't want to change anything, and no one has asked me to. It will be even more interesting when people see it."

"The plot is not 'Shame on MAGA supporters; we liberal elites want to teach them a lesson.' "

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When Seth Rogen says, "It sucks when an evil world leader gets your movie canceled," it would be fair to assume he's talking about his own film *The Interview*. After all, the comedy about an attempt to assassinate Kim Jong-un was pulled from Sony's release calendar in 2014 amid an internal hack on the studio credited to North Korea. But no, the quote is actually something Rogen said in August about *The Hunt* — and a grim reminder of history's tendency to repeat itself.

The Hunt is hardly the first film to face external obstacles impacting its release. *The Interview* was kept out of major theater chains; *Collateral Damage*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, was delayed after 9/11 because of its terrorism theme; *Dr. Strangelove's* release date was pushed after the JFK assassination; *A Clockwork Orange* was pulled from theaters in the U.K. after the film's director, Stanley Kubrick, expressed concern about copycat crimes.

Among the people I spoke with, including free-speech lawyers and film historians, the comparison that kept coming up was the fearmongering that gripped the U.S. during the McCarthyism period of the 1950s. We're not there yet, but the notion that a filmmaker today could get blacklisted for running afoul of government narratives doesn't seem farfetched. As it is, this era in cinema is focused almost entirely on intellectual-

property franchises, and projects that take creative risks tend to be relegated to streaming.

"When companies start banning or dropping films because they're afraid of their social content, that's a bad sign," says Joseph McBride, who worked as a Hollywood screenwriter for 18 years, on *Rock 'n' Roll High School* and other films. "Hollywood is terribly afraid of social issues, even today. I wanted to do a Fidel Castro biopic and had a very fun idea for it. You can imagine what kind of reaction I got."

These days, Trump's wrath can be aimed not only at political foes but at any element of the media that has irked him. In March 2019 the president doubled down on his criticism of *Saturday Night Live* by branding the show "one-sided media coverage" and asking, "Should Federal Election Commission and/or FCC look into this?" In December, Amazon claimed it had lost out on a multibillion-dollar cloud contract due to Trump's attacks on the company and its founder, Jeff Bezos. (Bezos owns *The Washington Post*, a frequent target of Trump's vitriol.) And Trump has been a vocal critic of former NFL star Colin Kaepernick, who remains unemployed by the league after kneeling during the national anthem to protest police injustice.

A key difference between today's era and previous ones is the sense that Twitter, Trump's weapon of choice, can amplify the concerns of a fringe group or give a false read of the national temperature. Take, for example, Warner Bros.' villain-origin tale *Joker*, which stirred up prerelease panic on social media that the gritty movie could lead to real-world violence. Warner stood its ground and released the film in October as planned; it went on to become the highest-grossing R-rated movie of all time and the recipient of more Oscar nominations than any other 2019 title. Of course Warner would have known a movie like *Joker*, with its built-in audience, would likely be a high earner, something that's less certain with an original concept à la *The Hunt*.

"When the studios confront this kind of resistance, if they see it operating not in their financial interest, they'll fold like a cheap suit," says Thomas Doherty, cultural historian and author of *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist*. "We're in another time right now where producers, distributors and exhibitors feel that same blacklist-like sense of fear."

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For Zobel, there's a hint of familiarity to all this. After his 2007 film *Great World of Sound* earned the breakthrough director prize at the Gotham Awards, he went on to make 2012's *Compliance*. (I have an IMDb credit for helping out on the set.) It's based on a true story of a fast-food manager, played by Ann Dowd in a breakout role, ordering a strip search of a young female employee at the behest of a police impersonator. Dubbed by the Daily Beast "the year's most controversial film," *Compliance* would serve as Zobel's introduction to polarizing reactions to his work.

When I reconnect with Dowd to tell her I'm writing about *The Hunt*, she couldn't be more encouraging. The Emmy-winning actress — known for playing the *Handmaid's Tale* monster Aunt Lydia, a character Michelle Wolf famously compared to then White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders during the 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner — is quick to point out the hypocrisy of Trump condemning a movie about gun violence when he's unwilling to stand up to the NRA.

"The fact that Trump has anything to say on the matter is so ridiculous," says Dowd, who reunited with Zobel when he directed episodes of *The Leftovers*. "What Craig would support, I would support without taking a beat, and I don't think it's anybody's place to censor what is to be released and what isn't. People have a choice to go or not to go—that's up to them. You have to be courageous, and if you're trusting a director enough to hire him, then fulfill your obligation. It's unacceptable."

A telling difference between the two films is that Zobel traveled the country with *Compliance* and held Q&As to promote discourse about its challenging themes. That wasn't possible just seven years later with *The Hunt*, both because of the Twitter threats and, well, because there was no film to promote. "As a culture, something got darker," he says.

Kathy Griffin said as much when she sat for the *Playboy Interview* in 2018. The boundary-pushing comedian saw her career path change irrevocably when she posted an image in 2017 of herself holding a facsimile of Trump's severed head. "I was not a George W. Bush fan, but it was nothing like this during W.'s presidency," Griffin said. "During W. you could still make jokes about the president."

Zobel's most introspective moment comes when I ask whether the uproar that led to the film being shelved would have happened under a different commander in chief. "I think about this question all the time," he replies. "I live in Georgia, I made a TV show in Pittsburgh, I'm making one now in Philly — and Pennsylvania isn't Hollywood. I find it enlightening how much similarity I have with people who hold different political views from mine. That was part of the spirit of the movie: In reality, we're not that far apart."

He sighs heavily. "But now I don't have high hopes, to be honest. Changing the president isn't going to fix that. As a culture, we have to make a choice that we don't want to be like that." ■

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WWW.BASTIANPHOTOS.COM
MUA JESSICA TULLAS | @GLAMBARBYJESS

Describe yourself in three words.
Exotic, Wild and passionate

Were you excited to shoot for playboy?
Incredibly excited! This is my sixth time shooting for Playboy so I feel like part of the family now! I've met some amazing people along the way that I will never forget.

What was it like starting out as a model?
It was a super powerful experience and I'm super thankful I stuck to it - diving into it and trusting this path has given me some of the most fulfilling experiences of my life!

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
When I travel out of the country for modeling shoots we usually shoot from sun up to sundown, so finding the time to get in my workout/health routines can be difficult at times.

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modeling.
Wakeboarding on the ocean with my homies on a beautiful sunny day

Do you feel more like a city person or country person?
I was raised in South Georgia and grew up on the back of a horse so I'm definitely a country girl at heart.

If you could live anywhere in the world where would it be?
Either Bali or Maui!

Do you have a secret talent?
I can breathe and eat fire.

Guilty pleasure?
Binge watching alien documentaries while smoking the finest California bud.

Which song is certain to make you cry when you hear it?
When bars play the song "closing time" . Because that means the party is over and I don't like to turn down! Then I remember I am the party haha ;)

What is your favorite word in any language and what does it mean?
Ikigai-it's a Japanese concept that means"reason for being, direction and purpose in life" where your passion, mission, profession and vocation meet. Sapiosexual, getting high on intelligent conversation

Any last words you would like to share with your readers?
Sending out healing energy to the world right now! ONE LOVE BABYYYY! Thank you for reading a bit about me - xoxo Elektra

Don't Fuck

Don't Fuck

Don't Fuck

Don't Fuck

With Betty Tompkins

From anti-porn feminists to the French government to Instagram, Tompkins has been fighting censorship—and paving the way to free sexual expression—for nearly 50 years

BY **ALISON M. GINGERAS**

"I was an accidental dissident."

Betty Tompkins is talking about her rocky beginnings in the New York art world of the early 1970s. Although she may not have set out to become a feminist renegade, her comment comes across as a surprising understatement, given that her entire practice has been a case study in the assertion of free speech — against the pieties of government watchdogs, art-world gatekeepers and factions within the feminist mainstream. And though Tompkins is a prolific artist who continues to push the boundaries of political correctness, her decision to appropriate hardcore pornography as her primary source material resulted in a revolutionary position on one of the most controversial aspects of First Amendment law.

In 1969 Tompkins embarked on a series of photorealist works she audaciously titled *Fuck Paintings*. Rendered in airbrush on monumental canvases, the paintings portray tightly cropped scenes of intercourse based on her first husband's collection of explicit photographs. Over five years, she made nine seven-foottall canvases that unapologetically depict penetration.

"The porn came with him," Tompkins says, reflecting on her ex-husband's contributions. "What I was doing, when I look back on it, was outrageous. A decade before we met, he would see ads for photos in the back of girly magazines. They were about two by three inches." Because it was then illegal to send pornographic material through the U.S. Postal Service, her husband rented a mailbox in Vancouver, Canada and would drive there from Washington state to procure his clandestine stash. "He had to hide them in the cushions of his car crossing the border," Tompkins recalls. Although such images are no longer prohibited by law, Tompkins's compositions still manage to startle. Her *Fuck Paintings* are simultaneously abstract and figurative: She transformed the graphic punctum of pornographic penetration into portraits of sexual free speech.

Little could she anticipate how these paintings would become flashpoints in the feminist sex wars that would rage throughout the 1970s and 1980s and up to the present. The *Fuck Paintings* weren't specifically made to address shifting social attitudes toward sex, but the work was developing in tandem with major political and legal debates around the definition of obscenity. After numerous court rulings led to the progressive relaxation of strictures on sexual speech in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the so-called golden age of porn bloomed — a period often cited as beginning with the 1969 release of Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* and continuing with the widespread distribution of X-rated films such as *Deep Throat*. Pornography polarized the women's movement: Feminist discussions about women's sexual agency, as well as polemics around porn's supposedly inherent misogyny, divided women into opposing factions.

Tompkins hadn't set out to take sides with her *Fuck Paintings*. "At that time," she recalls, "I was totally unaware of all the prejudices in the art world toward the young and toward women." The catalyst for her subject matter was her boredom with the art that New York galleries were championing, later fueled by her disgust with the blanket rejections she received from those same galleries when she spoke to them about exhibiting her work. "Nobody even said maybe; it was no! Even the women dealers refused me," she says, the emotion in her voice rising as she reminisces. "When I questioned them, they all said, 'We don't show artists your age.' Then they would say, 'Don't come back at all; we don't show women.' It was shocking, and it was also totally liberating." With nothing left to lose, Tompkins sat in her small bedroom studio and plotted her next move.

Fuck Painting #1 (1969) took shape as she rummaged through her husband's photography collection. "I started cropping with my fingers, then ripped up pieces of paper to find exactly what I wanted." She removed the models' faces, hands and feet, a gesture that sparked her radical breakthrough in a humble space "about five feet wide between my bed and the wall." Using an airbrush loaded with white and black acrylic to achieve a hyperreal effect, she created her first Fuck Painting: a seven-foot-tall vertical canvas depicting vaginal coitus with the female on top — a fitting position for Tompkins's prefiguration of sex-positive feminism. The anonymous woman's ass, offset by dark shadows and some wisps of her partner's pubic hair, dominates the composition; the man's spread thighs, scrotum and part of his erect penis take up the bottom half of the canvas. Removing all traces of the couple's identity,

What **I saw** was hundreds of years of **misogyny** in the art world coming up to my **face** and giving itself to me as a **present.**"

rendering their flesh in gradations of gray, Tompkins bypassed the soft-core tropes of commercial erotica to focus on pointblank phallic penetration. Unfettered by a need to please, she began to explore the provocative iconography that became her signature preoccupation — as yet unaware of how divisive her subject matter would become.

Before Tompkins could even begin to establish herself, censorship waylaid her career. "When I moved to SoHo I was invited to be in a show called A Flash of U.S. Avant Garde: Realism, New Realism, Photo Realism, at the Espace Cardin in Paris. At that point I had been in two group shows in New York City, one at Warren Benedek Gallery and the other at Lo Giudice Gallery," Tompkins told me during a panel discussion at the Dallas Contemporary museum in 2016. She shipped Fuck Painting #1 and Fuck Painting #5 (1972) to Europe, only to have them impounded at the French border on the grounds that they violated obscenity laws. Instead of basking in what should have been her breakout moment, Tompkins belatedly learned of the seizure. "I received a letter from the curator of the show saying my work had been stopped in customs," she said in 2016. "I was really upset. I felt totally blindsided by the event." For about a year Tompkins waged a bureaucratic battle to get her paintings returned to New York. "It felt like a decade in the analog age," she says.

Although the whole French affair was debilitating, Tompkins didn't take it passively. She leveraged and transformed the negativity, embarking on her Censored Grid series in 1974. In these drawings, Tompkins revisits the same pornographic motifs as in her previous series, this time meticulously rendered in pencil, pen and ink, often with the "offending" parts obscured by the word censored drawn, written or stamped over the graphic imagery.

"It was a way to keep sane," she explains. "I was not up on any art history that had to do with censorship, except maybe Courbet's painting." (Indeed, the Fuck Paintings are heirs to The Origin of the World, the infamous 19th century oil painting of female genitalia — the ur-work of sexually explicit art in the Western canon.) "Basically what I said was, 'Oh you think you can censor me? I can do a better job.' I thought if I censored myself it would have more legitimacy."

Initially deployed out of frustration, text became a staple of Tompkins's conceptual tool kit. She would foreground language in much of her later work as a way of reclaiming vile, misogynistic or demeaning terms — most recently in her Women Words series, begun in 2013. In the same manner that she had appropriated pre-existing photography for her

Fuck Paintings, Tompkins culled her texts from an archive of more than 3,500 terms for women she had solicited via email. "What was really important with the thousand 'women words' on canvas was that none of them could be from me," she says. "The rule I made was it all had to be given to me." Painted on backgrounds that range from monochromatic to lace overlays or close-ups of the female body, epithets such as bitch, slut and cunt dominate this anthology of small canvases, as do clichés like ball and chain and the imagistic I'm going to Jackson Pollock all over her face. As the series evolved, Tompkins began to transpose the words onto the female subjects within iconic works by male photographers including Helmut Newton and Richard Avedon.

But Tompkins could not direct her defiance at adversaries she didn't realize she had.

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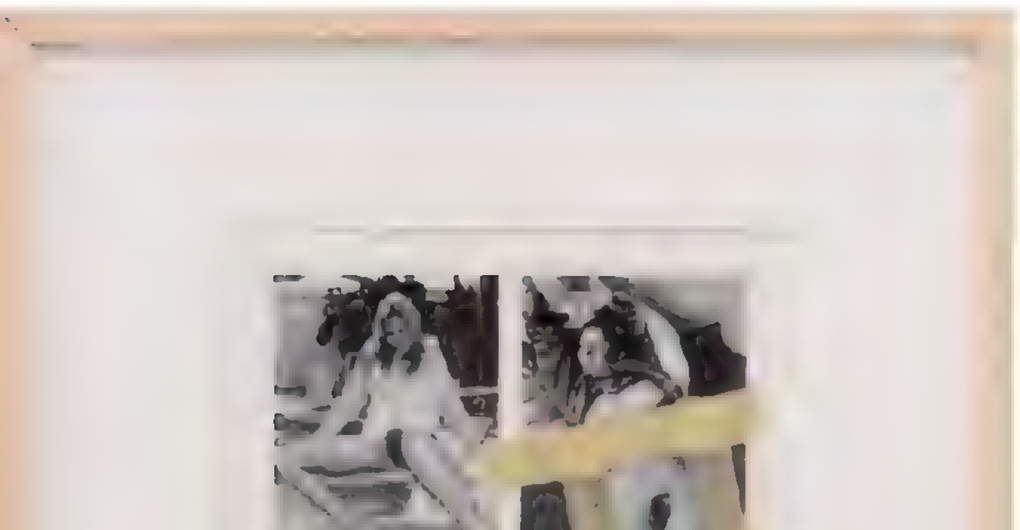
Around the time her work was facing governmental erasure in Europe, Tompkins was subjected to an even more powerful form of exclusion by women artists in her own backyard. Emboldened by the momentum of the women's liberation movement, feminist artists groups had mushroomed in New York City. In Tompkins's SoHo neighborhood, women-run collectives such as AIR Gallery (which is also artist-run) were founded in the early 1970s to provide a platform for women who'd been systematically excluded from the commercial art world — some of them, anyway.

"I saw every show they put up at AIR, but my impression was that you were invited to show. It was like a club," Tompkins says, remembering the cold shoulder she received from her feminist neighbors.

Unbeknownst to Tompkins, another coterie of feminist artists had banded together in solidarity over their right to make explicit erotic art. The Fight



Opening page: Fuck Painting #1, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches. Left: Collage #6, 1973, mixed media, 5 x 4 inches. Below left: Collage #12, 1977, mixed media, 11 x 8 inches. Below right: Cow Cunt #2, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches.

Right: I'm going to..., 2018, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. **Below left:** Babydoll #2, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 4 x 6 inches. **Below right:** Women Words, installation view at PPOW Gallery, New York, 2019 (originally exhibited at the FLAG Art Foundation).

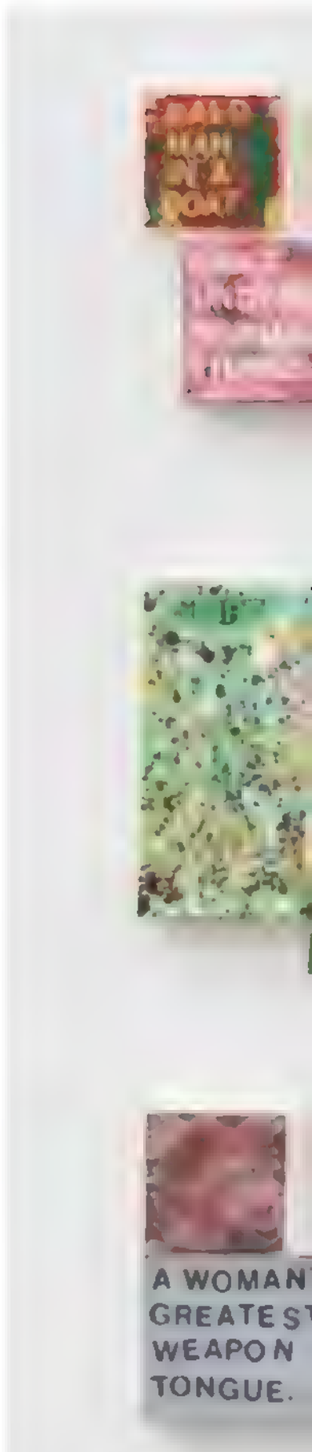
Censorship Group, founded in 1973 by artist Anita Steckel, could have been a game-changing outlet for Tompkins. Its manifesto seemed tailor-made for her iconography and her own struggle against censors: "If the erect penis is not 'wholesome' enough to go into museums — it should not be considered 'wholesome' enough to go into women. And if the erect penis is 'wholesome' enough to go into women, then it is more than 'wholesome' enough to go into the greatest art museums." Yet this bold vindication of phallic imagery would not be extended to Tompkins. While the group decried museums' puritanical policies and asserted the right of women artists to reclaim this field of sexual representation for themselves, some members opposed commercially produced pornographic material, claiming it was a tool of patriarchal oppression.

"I had used pornographic photographs that I hadn't taken myself," Tompkins says. "That was the main objection."

In the mid-1970s, Tompkins literally rolled up her monumental *Fuck Paintings* and put them in storage in her loft. She made a living teaching for the next three decades. (A surreal side note: The gender-convention-pushing comedian Joan Rivers was a private oil-painting student of Tompkins in the early 2000s.) Teaching did not stop her from making art: She created a series of paintings on paper based on foundational legal texts such as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights — the word law appears in their backdrops, repeated in all caps like a protest chant. "I'd read an article that posited that students could not identify them on sight. That was shocking. So I painted them." Reminiscent of fragmented illuminated manuscripts, these pieces play upon Tompkins's struggle against repression — which dates back to her earliest childhood memories.

Tompkins was born in Washington, D.C. in 1945 and raised in Philadelphia. Her father was head of the local chapter of the left-wing Progressive Party — a controversial association in an age of Cold War paranoia. "My first complete sentence," she says, "was 'Do you have a search warrant?' — when I was a toddler with a five-word vocabulary!" The FBI regularly followed Tompkins and her sister to school, during a time when the government was largely anti-liberal. It's hard not to see these formative experiences as a source of Tompkins's fortitude in asserting her rights as a citizen, an artist and a woman. She has also cited the way she was raised as a reason for her disinterest in belonging to systems and groups as an adult.

Only at the turn of the 21st century was Tompkins given another opportunity to show in New York — this time on her own terms. In 2002, New York City public school teacher turned renowned gallerist Mitchell Algus finally had the guts to exhibit her full cycle of nine *Fuck Paintings*. "Jerry Saltz came into the gallery around 2000 or 2001 and handed me a sheet of



slides Betty had sent him," Algus recalls. "I immediately called her."

Ever the art world tastemaker, Saltz was at that time serving as art critic at *The Village Voice*. "I used to get a lot of unsolicited slides from artists. I looked at them all. Then came Betty Tompkins's slides. They sizzled—still," he says. "I called Betty. She was the real deal, obviously. I remember thinking, This is how free art is! Women are finally getting to tell their stories." With Saltz's endorsement and Algus's commitment to spotlighting artists who'd been hidden in plain sight, the stage was set. Algus recalls of the *Fuck Paintings*, "The fact that they were rolled up appealed to me." When asked if he was nervous about debuting them, he says, "They were good paintings, and that was their defense. If that was not the case, it would have fallen flat."

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With critical momentum from Saltz and support from esteemed fellow artists (Robert Gober and Donald Moffett were among the first to buy paintings from the 2002 show), this time around critics paid attention, and the censors were kept at bay — albeit temporarily. The *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter declared Tompkins's belated debut "formidable" in an article entitled "Two Nods to Feminism, Long Snubbed by Curators."

Artist Marilyn Minter still remembers the breakthrough show. "When I first saw her hardcore images at Mitchell Algus, I couldn't believe my eyes," Minter says. "Honestly, my first thought was, Damn, I thought I was the first. But I also thought how much braver she was than me and how much shame must have been thrown at her back in the 1970s. Being officially censored by the government was truly scary stuff."

Speaking of the art-world backlash both she and Tompkins experienced, Minter continues, "Most art people were so frightened about any women owning sexual agency. It was such a threat to the status quo back then and still today, unfortunately." Adds Saltz, "The world still fears women picturing dicks and blow jobs." Nevertheless, Tompkins's 2002 outing brought in the first of many critical appraisals that would help reinsert her into art history and a larger feminist conversation.

By that time, feminist discourse had become less polarized and more diverse. The anti-pornography wing of American feminism, promulgated by theorist Andrea Dworkin and lawyer Catharine MacKinnon, had lost its stranglehold, allowing for a range of positions on sexual speech in the mainstream and giving credence to more sex-positive feminisms. Despite the high emotional toll, Tompkins's work prevailed as a commentary on and harbinger of the ferocious political tensions that surround issues of sexuality, sexual free speech and sex work today.

Given this second chance to build her profile, Tompkins wasted no time. After her debut show with Algus, she began a

slow but steady climb out of obscurity. As her extraordinary story spread and revisionist art histories began to incorporate her work into the narrative of 20th century art, invitations to show in galleries, museums and biennials arrived in Tompkins's in-box from around the world. *Fuck Painting #1* was acquired by the National Museum of Modern Art at Paris's Centre Pompidou — a glorious outcome for a work that spent 30 years rolled up under the artist's pool table. With this new approbation, Tompkins not only returned to making *Fuck Paintings*, she jubilantly expanded the range of her work, no longer limited to her original trove of miniature porno photos. With the savvy of a millennial, she mined the internet for material and advocated for her work on social media. Like a warrior who has awoken from forced hibernation, Tompkins engaged with new fronts on the battlefield for free speech and gender equity.

Since she joined Instagram in 2015, Tompkins's postings of her paintings have been regularly taken down — flagged as "inappropriate." In the spring of 2019, her account was deactivated. After protesting with the help of fellow artists, she got it reinstated, and Instagram invited her to participate in a private roundtable on censorship with other artists and cultural figures.

"As it turned out, I couldn't be there," she says. "So I asked if it would be okay to write something that could be read at the panel so it's on the record." Tompkins spent two weeks wracking her brain. Instagram, after all, is not a public utility or a public space and therefore not required to uphold the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

"I said to myself, You actually never read their community guidelines. So I read them, and I was simultaneously so fucking angry and laughing so hard that I threw out all my ideas and sat down and wrote a statement." Tompkins learned that when it comes to nudity, Instagram's rules allow for certain images such as nursing babies and mastectomy scars. "And, I quote, 'Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is okay too.' " After reading that, she wrote a statement for the panel that simply said, " 'These are your community guidelines. Follow them. Do better.' That was my whole statement."

Still occasionally subjected to deleted posts and account shutdowns (which Instagram attributes to "mistakes" due to high user volume), she hasn't shied away from holding the platform to its terms of use or publicly calling out its hypocrisies. Tompkins will not be silenced — and similar to her practice in the 1970s, she has immortalized posts deleted by Instagram as the basis of a new series of *Censored* paintings.

The same timely quest for justice drives Tompkins's most recent body of work. Under the umbrella title *Apologia*, Tompkins draws on public mea culpas from some of the most egregious sexual abusers toppled by the #MeToo movement, including press statements by notorious offenders Harvey Weinstein, Les Moonves, Mario Batali, Matt Lauer, Knight Landesman, Louis C.K. and Charlie Rose, among many others. Using her signature Bazooka-pink paint, Tompkins meticulously hand-paints the language geared toward covering up or redeeming bad behavior onto reproductions of famous paintings. In addition to highlighting the falsehoods and rhetorical backpedaling, she transforms familiar works by artists such as Ingres and Degas in the *Women Words* series by covering the female figures with the toxic language. Or as Tompkins explains, overlaying a woman in an art historical image with these scripts is like "putting her in a shroud: You're obliterating her, hiding her with words."

In other *Apologia* pieces, Tompkins paints over the male figures in historical works by women artists — such as Artemisia Gentileschi's biblical scene *Jael and Sisera* (1620). Obscuring the supine figure of the general Sisera, who is about to be murdered by the woman Jael, Tompkins superimposes the words of artist Chuck Close, who has been accused of sexual misconduct by numerous young women: "It's lies. I haven't slept in weeks. I've been such a supporter of women and women artists. I've done nothing wrong and I'm being crucified."

Tompkins's textual interventions confront the distortions of history while holding up a mirror to our present-day reckoning with systemic abuses of power. "One day I thought, Art history!" she says. "What I saw was hundreds and hundreds of years of misogyny in the art world coming right up to my face and giving itself to me as a present."

It's tempting to interpret the *Apologia* series as an implicit rebuke to a college professor who, according to Tompkins, once told her, "The only way you're making it in New York, honey, is on your back." And though decades separate her most recent word paintings and the pieces that scared off gallerists in the 1970s, they're united by Tompkins's will to transform or reclaim forces that seek to silence her. Her example has paved the way for a whole new generation of artists who continue the battle over sexual free speech, expanding on the feminist debates of the 1970s to explore and represent non-heteronormative erotic imaginaries. She may have started out as an accidental dissident, but Tompkins has grown to harness her monumentally defiant spirit.

Left: Women Words (Helmut Newton #6), 2018, acrylic on book page, 14¾ x 10⅝ inches.

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